Melissa Ichiuji: In the Flesh
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When she dances, acts, sculpts, sews or films, artist Melissa Ichiuji presents the human figure in political and personal terms, examining its various states of desire or distortion. This exhibition *In the Flesh* presents three discreet recent bodies of Ichiuji’s work: a series of busts of political figures from the 2012 election season entitled *Fair Game*, a trio of life-sized sculptures of female bodies, and lastly, *Everything to Lose*, a film and corresponding photographs of the artist donning an elaborately sculpted costume. Despite seeming differences in medium and subject in this exhibition, Ichiuji works with similar materials and artistic practices in each. She sculpts with fabric and pantyhose and does not hide raw, purposefully crude stitches and seams. Because the pantyhose stands in for flesh; bits of thread under the surfaces look like veins, and gestures seem animated, Ichiuji’s heads and bodies are paradoxically naturalistic and doll-like. “My background as a dancer and an actor,” Ichiuji explains, “informs the physicality of my figures.” Mimeticism, or the evocation of the “real” body, in Ichiuji’s work is mesmerisingly fraught. One sees abstraction and strange realism at once. Her political portraits are uncannily accurate; life-size sculptures approximate the presence of a live figure, and her own body in performance and film hypnotically and paradoxically is obscured and revealed. The perceived fantasy implicit in her work chafes against the viewer’s detection of the “real.” This friction can be seen in how Ichiuji’s real body—her hand, her upper back, her own curves and flesh—is perceptible through the doll-like costume she wears in *Everything to Lose*. Likewise, from the *Fair Game* series, one can recognize Newt Gingrich’s characteristic smile through a tangle of women’s underwear, and the distorted figures in her larger-scaled sculptures appear on the brink of movement.
Ichiuji’s sculptures from her series entitled Fair Game depict the likenesses of Barak Obama, Mitt Romney, Paul Ryan, Newt Gingrich, John Edwards and other contemporary American politicians. Her sculptures are cousins to caricatures and political satire, yet the viewer knows at once who is represented in each portrait. The portraits are derived from published newspaper and internet photographs, and one is called on to count the similarities and differences between the portraits and their photographic referents. This careful comparison incites a review of scandals and stories, skewed political rhetoric and construction of celebrity and persona; sound bites are turned into fabric and stitches. Yet, these political leaders also call to mind classical Roman busts in their eerie verisimilitude and the grandiosity and celebrity attached to contemporary politicians. Valuing realistic depictions, Romans tied physical expressions, furrowed brows and faithful representations of folds, lines, and facial structure to particular virtues and expressions of personality—loyalty, seriousness, wisdom and determination. Contrarily, though, the busts do not simply depict the nobility of Roman emperors and heroes, but instead are marked more by pomposity and spectacle rather than nobility and stateliness.

By depicting both Republicans and Democrats, Ichiuji seems to be a bipartisan commentator; however, she keeps the concepts of fairness and impartiality purposefully ambiguous. Her own politics are not necessarily hidden, but there is a kind of equity in her aesthetic approach. After the election, as media cycles wind down and rev up again depending on controversy and electoral schedules, these sculptures exist less as mounted heads and more as depraved personages, participants in the blown-up grotesquerie of the contemporary political landscape. In other words, they can be understood in contrast to noble Roman portraits. No dignity or decorum can be found in leaders caught in sex scandals or with a face
constructed with women’s underwear. “I am attempting to challenge the tradition of portraiture that elevates its subject and affirms his or her importance, nobility and power,” asserts Ichiuji. “I wondered what a portrait based on current media coverage might look like.” With a cynical and realistic eye on the political media frenzy, Ichiuji exposes the politicians’ superficial rhetoric and overblown personae. Because the portraits are not clearly flattering nor the subjects necessarily worthy of celebration, this series reflects the public’s complicated construction and perception of celebrity politicians. Ichiuji’s sculptures can be understood in a post-pop art context, meaning that her subject matter—popular culture—intersects with an examination of how contemporary political events represent and are represented by mass audiences. In other words, this series provides a commentary not merely on a specific election cycle, but on how the culture regards human behavior, ethical issues, political stances and physical characteristics.

Ichiuji’s portrait of Barack Obama was quite controversial when first exhibited in Washington, DC in 2012. Obama is depicted with his face downcast; darker-colored panty hose indicate dark shadows under his closed-over eyes. Stitches keep his fragmented visage together, but his face also seems to be on the verge of also being torn apart. In the original version of the sculpture, glittery red petals emerge from the side of Obama’s head, surrounding a large, black center of this flower-like form. Viewers who saw the image of this sculpture on invitations to the exhibition and on the artist’s website immediately interpreted the portrait as a depiction of a President shot in the head and sent the gallery and Ichiuji incensed messages. “People thought it was some kind of call to action to hurt the president, which wasn’t the intent at all,” recounts Ichiuji. The gallery’s owner requested that the sculpture be altered for the exhibition. The sculpture of Obama, in its second iteration, is depicted with doves emerging from his head, signifying his dream of hope, his political message and the enthusiasm surrounding his 2008 election. Although similar in their appropriation of press photographs and emphasis on the message of optimistic change, this work still can be seen in contrast to Shepard Fairey’s Hope poster of Barak Obama, made specifically in support of his 2008 election. Ichiuji’s portrait is not meant to be understood as explicitly as Fairey’s in terms of depicting Obama idealized hero nor in its use as explicit promotion. She evokes a more complicated pathos in the bodily, three-dimensionality of the work. Ichiuji did not intend for Obama to appear shot in the work’s original form; for Ichiuji, the glittery flower signified, perhaps more subtly, his exuberance of ideas and positive prospects for economic, environmental and social changes. The black hole, lined with a ruffled red, edge nonetheless calls to mind the gruesome images of John F. Kennedy in the immediate aftermath of the assassination and the horrific accounts of how the bullet impacted a large section of his skull bone. The positioning of Obama’s imagined wound remarkably approximates that of the shocking photographs of Kennedy. Because Ichiuji’s intent was not understood by some viewers, she showed remarkable openness to artistic changes. But what is most striking, however, is the reticence of these viewers and the gallerist to allow for the ambiguity of artwork, the depiction of a public figure as a mortal human, not as an unaffected leader.

Like Andy Warhol, Ichiuji uses press photographs as source material to create work reflective of contemporary events, death, popular culture and celebrity. Ichiuji’s bust of Michelle Obama echoes Warhol’s silkscreens of Jackie Kennedy at the funeral of her husband. By depicting Michelle Obama in a black hat and veil, Ichiuji foreshadows Michelle in mourning. Given the vitriolic attacks and real threats made toward any sitting president, this sculpture does not foretell possible events, but echoes Jackie Kennedy’s past loss. Soft vegetables fill her hat, an allusion to the vegetable garden she planted at the White House and her cause for Americans’ better health; strands of Barack Obama, 2012, mixed media, 26 x 32 x 14 in. Photograph by Brandon Webster. ©Melissa Ichiuji. Courtesy of the artist.
pearls hang in a messy tangle around her neck, a reference to the media attention given to her style and fashion. Michelle’s image exposes Ichiuji’s work for all of its incongruities. It is both puppet and portrait; a study in politics as pop culture and as recollection and premonition of public tragedy.

The iconographic portraits of Obamas’ counterparts in the election of 2012, Mitt and Ann Romney, are also depicted with particularly symbolic or evocative features. Radio parts, toy parts, a French press and other metal objects appear in the fissure of Romney’s head, indicating the business-like, streamlined efficacy and cold workings of his brain. “They are meant to reference,” according to Ichiuji, “machinery, surveillance, artificial intelligence, puppetry and things contrived, processed and inorganic.”

Ann’s wide-mouth smile, flashing with rhinestones, blond hair in plaits like a horse’s tail allude to her ownership of an Olympic dressage horse. Known as “horse ballet,” dressage is a $77,000 per year expense for the Romneys, and Ichiuji suggests the couple’s extraordinary wealth as well as the media’s critical attention to this elite sport through her shimmering jewels and toothy grin.

Ichiuji creates physiognomic portraits, where character traits and observations of one’s personality are perceived in one’s appearance. With Newt Gingrich, his admitted infidelity with younger women is here represented through an abundant assemblage of Victoria’s Secret bras and underwear. Gingrich is literally clothed by sex scandal, while his distinctive smirk is unmistakable through the bra padding, tags, straps, and lace. In American politics, adulterous behavior by male politicians is almost expected; lewd details are sought, and shock is registered most often because of the politician’s hypocrisy and public pronouncements about “family values.”

Ichiuji’s portrait of Osama Bin Laden diverges most from the others, naturally, for portraying the foreign enemy, not the American candidate. His representation at once is grotesque and almost sympathetic. Ichiuji defies the convention that sculptural commemoration is given to
heroes, not villains, as the central function of portrait sculpture is understood to honor and memorialize. Although the other portraits of politicians seem critical and sharp, the sculpture of Bin Laden is more shocking in its inclusion as a dead enemy among living leaders. Perhaps more so than the others, the viewer attempts to read this portrait physiognomically; one looks for the evil in his eyes and the anti-American crusade in his straggly beard. In imagining connections between physical characteristics and psyche, Ichiuji asks her viewers to question such a fraught association between physical features and moral character in the other political figures.

Domestic Goddesses

Ichiuji’s faceless life-size sculptures might at first appear de-personalized and shockingly fantastical in contrast to the recognizable political heads. Yet, they are strikingly animate, sexually charged characters that paradoxically convey attraction and repulsion, reproduction and decomposition, conformity and deviance. Because of her use of strangely erogenous doll-like forms, as well as because of the compelling simultaneity of these binary oppositions, Ichiuji’s work has been discussed in terms of its similarities to surrealist works of the 1920s and 1930s. More than material or form, Ichiuji’s work evokes a surrealist urge to convey unpressed messages and meanings. In his *Surrealist Manifesto* artist Andre Breton explains, “Surrealism is called upon to reestablish dialogue in its essential truth. The interlocutors are freed from the obligation to be polite. He who speaks will develop no theses. But in principle, the reply cannot be concerned for the self-respect of the person speaking. For in the mind of the listener, word and images are only a springboard.” Ichiuji does not merely repeat a surrealist fascination with the body or the inner psyche, but she nevertheless, like her predecessors, allows her work to speak indecorous truths. Ichiuji’s work continues to
suggest this surrealist moment in her reluctance to conform to conventional standards of decorum; she invites misunderstandings and disrupts some sensibilities. Her intent, however, is not solely to shock, but to reveal a truth and expose with candor and disconcerting beauty a complex stance about love and loss, spectacle and banality. Ultimately, she pushes past this early twentieth-century moment to consider what is still resolutely real or misplaced in terms of understanding and defining sexuality and mortality.

Because Ichiuji makes private anxieties public and also places women's bodies as the subject of her work, specific comparisons have been made to Hans Bellmer's surrealist sculptures and photographs of distorted dolls as well as to Louise Bourgeois's objects that engage with bodily motifs. Additionally, writers on Ichiuji have drawn connections to surrealism because the idea of the “feminine” was central to surrealist practice in the 1920s and 1930s. Surrealists attempted to work from a somehow unconscious perspective and understood women as more effectively embodying the sense of madness, unobstructed desire and fundamental sexuality they sought. Ichiuji moves beyond Bellmer to animate and idiosyncratically personify her figures. Even exhausted and vulnerable, Ichiuji's figures are not simply surrealist, distorted objects of desire. By endowing her work with lifelikeness and vitality, she explicitly implies realities that lie outside the domain of art. In Reverie, for example, a child, with heart sewn on his chest, plump legs, round paunch, and ample bottom, looks like a teddy bear. Directed away from this child is a mother seated in a chair; the blank sweetness of the child-cum-stuffed animal contrasts with the embodied—exhausted, drained, and sexualized—mother. The same richly patterned fabric connects mother to child, but with legs spread apart, leather zipped open to her crotch to reveal a satiny pink lining and riffled red flourishes on her chest, the mother embodies a more complex psychic state than her offspring. The narrative conveyed in this sculpture is much more specific and complicated than the feminine bodies that more singularly depict sex and/or violence in Bellmer’s distorted dolls.
Ichiuji’s work presents a kind of theatrical tableau; mother turns away from adorable, lovable child. Her bright red high heels indicate that she conforms to masculine expectations of attractiveness and sensuality, her position reveals an exhaustion and passivity at odds with sexual attentiveness. The mechanisms that slink around her body from her head to her crotch allude to a masturbatory act or impulse, and in concert with the title, reveal the sense of reverie and pleasure the figure finds in the midst of or in spite of maternal obligation.

In recalling ideal female nudes depicted with dreamy gazes and gently caressing themselves, such as the placement of the gentle hand in Titian’s Venus of Urbino or the soft caress of the peacock fan in Ingres’s Grande Odalisque, Ichiuji’s Reverie disrupts this erstwhile fantasy of feminine desire.

Similarly, another of Ichiuji’s larger-scaled sculptures, Domestic Goddess, depicts a female figure with iconography about femininity and maternity. With a fashion mannequin’s stance, a nest with eggs located in a uterus-like pouch bounded by a vaginal form, Ichiuji again takes recognizable signifiers of femininity (high heels, breasts, particular gestures and poses) and juxtaposes them with the absurd and perverse (the addition of eggs, cheese grater, vacuum cleaner hose). The result is a subversion of cultural and biological expectations of femininity. These figures appear almost nude, or revealing, in their ambiguously, fabric-clad and almost impulsively stitched appearance; again, Ichiuji manipulates the idealized nude female figure, commonplace in the history of art and in mass media, to question how this concept of ideal beauty is defined. Artists in late 1970s and through the 1990s, such as Cindy Sherman, Eleanor Antin, Mary Kelly and Robert Gober, similarly confronted norms of the physical and social body and depicted in the figure as fragmented and distorted to address issues of gender and sexuality, work that art historians Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster and others also theoretically and formally connected to an earlier surrealist moment. Ichiuji does not patently rehearse her predecessors’ approach to the culturally and politically fraught body, but offers a new critique of media images and the social construction of identity. While these other contemporary artists represented bodies as wounded and exposed, dismembered and hysterical, Ichiuji carefully modulates and monitors the concepts of informe and abject that have been used to define this critical aesthetic practice. Ichiuji’s work echoes past discourses around the representations of women and mothers and solicits similar reactions of disgust and repulsion of particular art made in era of culture wars and identity politics. In continuing and challenging this subject, she also reminds her viewer that these issues are insistently unresolved and even more complicated in the twenty first century.

Ichiuji creates systems of objects, figures and textures that convey multiple meanings. In Domestic Goddess, for example, the blue eggs stand in for testicles, ovaries and babies at once, while the grater simultaneously conjures a human face, a deviant automaton or protective armor. Despite the ambiguity of its construction and multiplicity of these signifiers, the viewer unmistakably sees a mother. The exposed breast, the genitals seemingly turned inside out make this maternal body strange. The figure’s pose with its exaggerated contrapposto and subtle twist of the body suggests the stance of a fashion model or store mannequin. Taken together, the peculiar face, wild hair, brash colors and extreme textures create a spectacle; Ichiuji alludes to art, media and fashion culture to make these sculptures more than a late-twentieth century feminist reprisal of the female body. The works instead embody the twenty-first century fascination (and fetishization?) of the fashionable maternal body, most recently seen the notable royal “baby bump” of Kate Middleton and Angelina Jolie’s celebrity mastectomy. Moreover, the term “Domestic Goddess” slightly sardonically refers to a twenty-first century, upper-middle class woman who enjoys and excels in cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. In choosing the title Domestic Goddess, Ichiuji reflects a post-feminist moment—the perceived and sought-after “balance” of motherhood, work and beauty—to more realistically reflect a frantic, fragmented and distracted female self.
Everything to Lose

In *Everything to Lose*, a video work, Ichiuji shimmies and shakes in an almost transparent white lace unitard; tightly covering her body and face, it is embellished with mirrored disks, like an embodied disco ball. Although her undulating hips and torso, presented in slow-motion, might allude to erotic fantasy, she is neither stripper nor vulgar provocateur. Rather, Ichiuji offers a kind of strip-tease dance in rewind. The subject of the film is the putting on of an elaborate costume, even though the film is shown in reverse. The quick pacing and unusual sequence of the shots subtly reveal this sense of action moving backward. What we see her putting on is what she actually has taken off. Careful splicing of the film between this reverse motion and more “normal” *mise-en-scène* creates the sense that the space and time of the film is about spectacle and artificial construction to eliminate expectations of filmic verisimilitude. Some of her movements and gestures seem to be borrowed from a modern dance repertoire; she intersperses these more formal or dancerly movements with her act of *(un)*dressing and the more protracted gyrations. Although her body and movements reveal her professional training as a dancer, the sculptural costuming and its stylistic congruity with her visual art push this work beyond a single, specific genre or medium; it is at once dance and sculpture and film.

Ichiuji changes in (and out of) the fantastical costume methodically and in bodily layers. With every strange section of padding and covering, one recognizes the transparency of panty hose and her characteristic exposed stitches and purposefully crude patchwork of fabrics. Yet, the effect is, like her other work, simultaneously doll-like, inanimate and fleshy, veiny, and warm. When she dons a china doll-like mask with exaggerated pink cheeks, she induces a childlike sense of fantasy that uneasily contrasts with the eroticism of her body’s movements. While the sculpted face appears old-fashioned and lighthearted, the other,
more bodily elements added—fleshy cushioning around her thighs, bluish, red ball that she fondles and fingers, intestinal-like cord spiraled over her torso, covered by a fleshy corset—evoke the surrealist disquiet, the feminist abject and anxiety stemming from the evocation of the irrational, the indecorous and the uncanny. The recurrence of filmed sequences and gestures contributes to this sense of the bizarre and the dreamlike. At a particularly suggestive moment in the film, Ichiuji walks extremely close to the camera, stuffs lush, large red and pink flowers into a vaginal-like zippered pouch. Buttocks and breasts come next; again the slow, almost naked movements of her “real” body are juxtaposed with these fleshy prostheses. Breasts are snapped easily in to place, and finally, she inserts a stuffed red heart, lined with frilly purple lace, swiftly into her chest. She pushes the chair out of the frame, comes close to the camera, bends down a bit and holds a yellowed, hand-scrawled sign stating “I love you.” Then she rolls and tucks the message into the stuffed heart, zips it into her chest again, does a last little dance and finally sits. Because of the odd temporality and montaged sequencing, one imagines the film beginning where it ends.

Given the title, the viewer is prompted to question what it means to have “everything to lose” and what might there be to gain. Or, it infers that there is nothing to gain, since the phase usually avers “nothing to lose, everything to gain.” Ichiuji suggests vulnerability and loss, exposure and secrecy. More broadly, the title of the film signals the disclosure of the self in the twenty-first century, when everyone must decide how publicly to present one’s private affections, relationships and personae, through such outlets as Facebook, blogs, Instagram and Twitter, of course, and what it means to make one’s private self public. In the process of revealing and hiding her own body, making sculpture and performing for an audience, Ichiuji disrupts a kind of everyday expectations of what or how we know about others around us. She provokes desires and fears by showing
us her soft-sculpted versions of intestines and organs, breasts and genitals, in the midst of mesmerizing movements and a hypnotic rhythm. Ultimately, Ichiuji’s art practice as a whole confronts notions of truth and artifice; the carefully calculated facades and scripted sound bites of politicians, superficial constructions of beauty and feminine identity as well as bodies are revealed, understood and treated. Her work reminds the viewer that everything is tied to and revealed by the body—emotion, age, sexuality, fertility, death and disease, and as such, one’s corporeality truly is everything to lose. As everyone’s physical form is in a constant state of aging, inevitably leading toward death, the sense of loss referred to in the title is not plainly about inconsequential pride or fleeting affection. Alternatively, Everything to Lose considers the passing of youth and everyone’s ultimate mortality. Because she manipulates the continuity of time and the veracity of flesh, Ichiuji also provides an alternate message and meditation on impermanence. A bit of humor, a heartfelt message of love, nimble sways of the hips, a few gleaming reflections, and a rosy-cheeked smile assuage any overwhelming fears of loss.

Shannon Egan, Ph.D.
Director, Schmucker Art Gallery

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1 Sonja Carlborg, “Interview with Melissa Ichiuji,” April 29, 2011 in Melissa Ichiuji, If It Doesn’t Hurt, You’re Not Doing It Right (Washington, DC, 2011), 32.


3 It is important to note that the artist does not intend the amendment to this sculpture to be permanent; it is easily removable by unbuttoning. Additionally, this bust will be accepted by the National Museum of African American History and Culture as an artifact of the Obama campaign and tenure. Email correspondence with the author.


5 Email correspondence with the author.

6 See Martin Irvine, “Melissa Ichiuji,” in If It Doesn’t Hurt, You’re Not Doing It Right, 6-7.


8 See Sidney Lawrence, “Melissa Ichiuji’s Body Heat” in If It Doesn’t Hurt, You’re Not Doing It Right, 17.

Melissa Ichiuji: In the Flesh
August 30 - December 6, 2013

ARTIST’S TALK
September 25, 4 pm

RECEPTION
September 25, 5 - 6 pm

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