

BODY POLITIC

a short essay by Michael Chance

It is not merely a lack of imagination that leads humans to structure their understanding of social systems according to the form and organisation of their own bodies, for in them we find our most fundamental commonality: although our mental landscapes may be entirely different, we all share the same underlying physical pattern. We all have our own personal burden of pain, we all experience the slow realisation of mortality through gradual degeneration, and enjoy being able to move freely and expressively, and we see all of that in others. In our body revealed, we are at our most vulnerable, yet come together in blissful union and acceptance of our own form.

Understanding through bodily analogy takes unwieldy abstract concepts and roots them in personal experience, creating an empathetic, emotive engagement; rather than blank disinterest or cold cruelty, one is compelled to reach outwards and within oneself simultaneously.

To consider the living Earth as mother, a macrocosmic body that breathes, that self-regulates, that can be infected and can perish, not only forces a re-evaluation of our own exalted status (of suddenly feeling very small) but also the recognition of our duty to care, and be thankful to her for creating us.

The body as a vessel of elemental forces; the body as the site of suffering, punishment and redemption; the body as a machine, controlled by a mind intangible and separate; the body as a fluid, living process, made from billions of microscopic lives, with consciousness an emergent property of numerous interlinked systems; the body as an illusion of selfhood, an image of the figure, defined against or within the ground from which it coalesces. Our changing conception of the body and its relation to our mind reflects and informs our larger worldview.

The organisation of society at any point in history may relate to its conception of what is 'natural'. To see the mind as separate from a mechanical body, controlling it according to divine insight, is to give credence to an elitist, monarchic socio-political structure. To believe that the limbs and organs operate only at the instruction of the head is to approve a hierarchic chain of command. To recognise that the gut has a strong role in mental function, and limbs can spring into action without needing to appeal to the brain, is to recognise democracy and civil action. To consider the body as an energy exchange inextricably interconnected within a network of natural processes, ontologically indistinguishable from a butterfly, a tree or a wave, is to emphasise our ecological responsibility and suggest a horizontalist politics.

Today, it seems that our scientific understandings are becoming so complex and intangible, and our society so complex and global, that for many people, this relationship between the abstract and the concrete is breaking down; swimming in a torrent of information, an endless library full of contradictions and deceptions, they are unable to form a coherent image of reality, causing a retreat into 'common sense', or regression toward polarised thinking and fundamentalism.

Just as many people casually assume the Cartesian view of 'the ghost in the machine', so they cannot see an alternative to being led by a self-interested ruling class who show 'strong leadership' and 'make the tough decisions' on their behalf - a body which labours on at the behest of a mind unsympathetic to the pain of its lumbering host.

In such confusing times, when art is needed to filter and make some sense of it all, is the body still a useful allegorical device? Yes, it is still the most powerful available. This includes body as a function of narrative, but also in a manner more fundamental; it affects us directly, deeply, without recourse to potentially confusing intellectualisation. An image of a small boy washed up on a beach, or cradled, limp and cold in his father's arms, has proved that even the cruellest of xenophobes can be disarmed (at least for a moment). Their individualistic worldview is guarded by barriers of prejudice and hatred which can withstand countless assaults of reason, but may crumble if undercut by compassion.

Just as we look at others and know that within that body is another life, another mind, so we see figures in paintings and know they stand for more than their mere appearance. They catalyse a search for meaning and activate a painting more than anything else. During a recent period of making paintings about environmental issues, expressed through imaginary and memory landscapes, I found it disappointing that most people would view them passively, as 'just a landscape' that doesn't require further analysis. They are assumed to exist - like a real landscape - for no reason other than to provide a moment of calm appreciation, a soothing rest for the eye. It was only when I brought figures back into my work that viewers seemed to become agitated into deeper speculation.

Depicting the body is problematic, but the risks are worth taking. To navigate a minefield of sensitive gender / identity issues requires that we are self-reflexive, addressing our own prejudices as they emerge in the work, and yet, we must not be so fearful of causing offence that the meaning is diluted and fiery passion of our statement is extinguished.

Avoiding an objectifying reading of the body requires that the artist charge it with her own purpose and position it within a context. The figure in the landscape has been the holy grail for many artists, and reflects the spiritual urge to work out one's place in the universe, to explore the relationship between Man and Nature. The inclusion of architecture (or man-made structure) provides expression of how man is choosing to interpret that relationship at a given time; whether nurturing it, or pushing it toward disfunction and destruction.

The manner of that relationship underlies the temperament and actions of all society, but is most dangerously critical at the level of politics. To build a wall, draw a border, clear a forest or bulldoze an estate, to divide and displace, is to alter that relationship for countless people who feel powerless to defend their sense of place, connection to nature and freedom to move across their own planet.

For an artist, dealing with the body also draws one into a long continuum of imagery reaching back to the very earliest creative acts, across almost every culture; it can express such richness of meaning, without being tied to any one set of symbolic codes. Perhaps until the long-distant day when mankind abandons her corporeal form completely, it will still fascinate us, arouse us, shock us, but most importantly, connect us.