

PER- FECT IMPER- FECT- IONS

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School of Art Gallery



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

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UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

School of Art Gallery

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Miss Lyndsay Ladobruk, Canadian, b. 1980, *Strip Sandwich*, 2013, video 8:50 min, durational performance, courtesy of the artist

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Strip Sandwich signage designed and photo by Kristina Nordstrom

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WINNIPEG
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PERFECT IMPERFECTIONS

by Mary Reid



The lens tracks the eyes, the mouth, the wrinkles skin deep ... the expression on the face is fierce, sometimes tragic. And then calm – a knowing calm, worked on, flashy. A professional smile – and voilà!

– Claude Cahun, *Disavowals*, 1919–25

This is the opening statement of Claude Cahun's most significant piece of writing. It refers to the relationship between the camera, the photographer, and the model. In addition it touches upon the key signifiers of the face, as well as aspects of aging, of discomfort, and then the transformation to something "professional," of which the assumption is "beautiful." The concept of beauty is tied very closely to harmonious form, health, and hygiene. Created well over eighty years ago, the photographs made by Cahun challenge ideas of what is considered beautiful and undesirable and provide the stage on which the theme of this exhibition, *Perfection Imperfections*, plays out.



Fast-forwarding some fifty to eighty years from Cahun are Colin Campbell, Janet Werner, Dominique Rey, and Miss Lyndsay Ladobruk, who are all interested in exploring the ways in which beautiful and grotesque human bodies are now equal partners, with all the various behaviours both appropriately and inappropriately combined. Seen collectively, the works in this exhibition ask you to consider the bodies before you ... bodies which are full of foibles and flaws, vulnerable and fragile, but also remarkable and, ultimately, human.

There are many aspects that unify Claude Cahun's photographs but perhaps the most significant is that they are all self-portraits. Made within the

milieu of French Surrealism, the images are strikingly contemporary. Throughout her life Cahun challenged notions of gender and sexuality, using her own struggles as source material for her writings and photographs. Rediscovered by art historians in the 1980s and 1990s, Cahun is believed to have suffered from anorexia and to have made several suicide attempts over the course of her life. In 1919–20 she first shaved her head for what can be assumed to be an attempt to understand of her own self and defy preconceived notions by others. One of the earliest works included in this exhibition is a self-portrait attributed to this time period. Here, Cahun's hair is just beginning to grow back ever so slightly, almost a shadow of where it once was. Standing against

a stone wall, she stares commandingly at the camera, challenging the viewer to guess at her gender. In a white, baggy sweater and suspenders, her sex is androgynous, neither male nor female. Almost child-like, Cahun's representation of herself is undefined, unknowable, and yet one that she appears to fiercely protect. There is certainly a beauty in her strength. However, the shaved head, dark circled eyes, and stern expression connote the contemporary expression of a battle against cancer, a grotesque disease in all its machinations.

The slippage between male and female is picked up in the work of Colin Campbell. His critically acclaimed *The Woman from Malibu* (1977) series depicts Campbell adopting the role of the quintessential Southern Californian wealthy housewife. Predating the *Desperate Housewives* television serial and reality TV spinoffs by more than thirty years, Campbell's woman from Malibu seems to have the uncomplicated life of wealth and leisure while suffering from hard-to-believe problems and tragedies of the characters in these contemporary programs. These include almost running over Liza Minnelli in her car, a daughter who disappeared while going for a dress fitting, and a husband who died from a fall while hiking in the Himalayas, right in front of her eyes. The final episode, *Hollywood and Vine*, is presented in *Perfect Imperfections* and features Campbell transforming himself into his "perfect persona." Campbell expertly puts on makeup, wig,

rings, and earrings; however, the end result is not particularly convincing. Although he demonstrates all the mannerisms, affectations, and hand gestures of a "lady who lunches," Campbell does not make a particularly attractive woman, and this is perhaps not surprising, since he is quite a handsome man by contemporary standards of fashion and beauty. The conclusion of *Hollywood and Vine* documents the woman from Malibu impeccably dressed in a blouse, skirt, and heels, walking out into the hot, unforgiving desert in an absurd search for a pony skeleton. As she disappears from the view of the camera, her fate is unknown, but various gruesome scenarios can be assumed.

The interest in glamour and the idea of the necessity of a flawless veneer to hide the dark underbelly of what it means to be human is also investigated by Janet Werner in her paintings of celebrities Paris Hilton and Audrey Hepburn, respectively titled *Paris* (2006) and *Little Audrey* (2004–2013). Werner depicts Paris as a vacant doll upon which the viewer can project all sorts of narratives and meanings. However, given the title of the work and who is being depicted, associations with the real-life Paris's fabricated persona of being famous just because she is wealthy dominate any other interpretations. Werner subtly heightens the imperfections of Paris Hilton by giving her quite a long neck and highlighting the "star's" large nose. With Audrey Hepburn, Werner represents the impeccable









actress positioned in her role of the poor cockney flower girl Eliza Dolittle as she is being successfully transformed into an elegant and refined lady of high society in the 1964 movie *My Fair Lady*. In this ugly-duckling-to-swan story, notions of appropriate beauty and behaviour abound. Werner represents Hepburn/Dolittle as "new and improved," yet she paints a large red dot right over her nose, alternately suggesting a clown's nose and a target. Werner's painting highlights the absurdity of the story of *My Fair Lady* and the concept of a perfect woman, one of the legacies Audrey Hepburn left behind.

In contrast, Dominique Rey's *Erlking* series presents the organic dimension of the "normal" body gone awry in the natural landscape. The shock value of her images is subverted by the strangeness and complexity of the various unexpected appendages which are attached and seemingly married to her own body. Repulsion and attraction continuously oscillate. Some of the backdrops are strikingly seductive, such as the river bed that features the reclining *Still Hunter* (2011), whereas others, such as the avalanche of granite boulders engulfing the fragile figure in *Mound* (2011), are ominous and otherworldly. The bright, garish colours, at times fluorescent green and pink, of the costumes/characters Rey assumes, are completely discordant, yet their biomorphic bulges and forms are at the same time harmonious with their surroundings. In a process similar to those of Cahun

and Campbell, Rey transforms her own self, thereby critiquing her body and making use of assumptions and demands which she imposes. Described by the artist as self-portraits of the unconscious, these works straddle the boundaries and limitations of the body heavy with unfulfilled expectations, creating new understandings and opportunities of engagement of what it means to be perfect.

Miss Lyndsay Ladobruk pushes back at what contemporary society dictates as constituting the perfect body. Using her own petite yet ample body (complete with a recent gall bladder removal scar), Miss Lyndsay confronts stereotypical notions of exotic dancers. Her durational performance *Strip Sandwich* (2013) is rooted in the early history of burlesque, where the jiggle and wiggle of the fleshy body increased the titillation factor. Miss Lyndsay bravely and boldly challenges stereotypical notions of "fat" by combining food play and the lyrics of American punk rock band NOFX's 1995 song "Hotdog in a Hallway," with its chorus:

*She'll have another piece of pie
She'll have a double reuben rye
She works hard at eating well
That's why I love her.*

Positioned on a stage graced by a pink stripper pole covered with sandwiches of various types, in her frilly panties and bra, Miss Lyndsay Ladobruk performs



(for hours) conflating sex and food addiction, erotica, and the objectification of the female body with the empowerment of a body that is not a size zero.

You can choose to accept or reject the bodies presented by Cahun, Campbell, Werner, Rey, and Ladobruk as perfect or imperfect, as beautiful or grotesque. What is being presented in this exhibition is a body politic which reflects the reality that the human body is at times beyond our own personal control. By highlighting that the "real body" is not in line with the prominent message communicated through fashion and health industries, a space opens in which understandings of what is beautiful can incorporate the grotesque ... where the paradox of what is perfect is in fact full of imperfections, and what is imperfect can be considered a true form of perfection.



Perfect Imperfections: List of Works

Dimensions are listed in cm as height x width
r = reproduced page

Colin Campbell, Canadian, 1942–2001, *Hollywood and Vine*, from the series *The Woman from Malibu*, 1977, video, 20 min., photo courtesy of VTape, Toronto, r 2

Claude Cahun, French, born Lucy Schwob, 1894–1954, *Diable in Le Mystere d'Adam*, c.1929, black and white photograph, 12 x 15 (approx.), private collection

Claude Cahun, French, born Lucy Schwob, 1894–1954, *Self-Portrait*, c.1929, black and white photograph, 29 x 21 (approx.), private collection

Claude Cahun, French, born Lucy Schwob, 1894–1954, *Self-Portrait*, c.1919, black and white photograph, 20 x 15 (approx.), private collection, r 1

Claude Cahun, French, born Lucy Schwob, 1894–1954, *Self-Portrait*, c.1929, black and white photograph, 15 x 20 (approx.), private collection

Claude Cahun, French, born Lucy Schwob, 1894–1954, *Self-Portrait*, c.1929, black and white photograph, 29 x 22 (approx.), private collection

Claude Cahun, French, born Lucy Schwob, 1894–1954, *Self-Portrait*, c.1939, black and white photograph, 23 x 30 (approx.), private collection

Claude Cahun, French, born Lucy Schwob, 1894–1954, *Self-Portrait*, c.1939, black and white photograph, 21 x 15 (approx.), private collection

Claude Cahun, French, born Lucy Schwob, 1894–1954, *Self-Portrait*, c.1921, black and white photograph, 29 x 22 (approx.), private collection

Miss Lyndsay Ladobruk, Canadian, b. 1980, *Strip Sandwich*, 2013, video 8:50 min, durational performance, courtesy of the artist, r 9, cover

Dominique Rey, Canadian, b. 1976, *After the Shower*, 2011, C-print, 60.66 x 90.44, courtesy of the artist

Dominique Rey, Canadian, b. 1976, *Interloper*, 2011, C-print, 60.66 x 90.44, courtesy of the artist

Dominique Rey, Canadian, b. 1976, *Mound*, C-Print, 60.66 x 90.44, courtesy of the artist, r 7

Dominique Rey, Canadian, b. 1976, *Still Hunter*, 2011, C-Print, 60.66 x 90.44, courtesy of the artist, r 6

Dominique Rey, Canadian, b. 1976, *Thunderhead*, 2011, C-print, 76.20 x 50.80, courtesy of the artist

Dominique Rey, Canadian, b. 1976, *Watershed*, 2011, C-print, 76.20 x 50.80, courtesy of the artist

Dominique Rey, Canadian, b. 1976, *Winter Green*, 2011, C-print, 60.66 x 90.44, courtesy of the artist

Janet Werner, Canadian, b. 1959, *Boyfriend*, 2012, oil on canvas, 220.98 x 167.64, courtesy of Parisian Laundry, Montreal, photo credit: Guy L'Heureux

Janet Werner, Canadian, b. 1959, *Little Audrey*, 2004–2013, oil on canvas, 35.56 x 27.94, collection of the Artist, photo credit: Paul Litherland, r 5

Janet Werner, Canadian, b. 1959, *Paris*, 2006, oil on canvas, 137.16 x 114.3, courtesy of Birch Libralato, Toronto, photo credit: Paul Litherland, r 4

Janet Werner, Canadian, b. 1959, *Wrestler*, 2010, oil on canvas, 220.98 x 167.64, collection of the artist, photo credit: Guy L'Heureux

About the Artists

Claude Cahun was born Lucy Schwob in 1894 in Nantes, France. She was a photographer, essayist, and performer whose work was tied to the Paris Surrealist school of the 1930s. Although she cannot be strictly categorized as a Surrealist, her work does incorporate Surrealist tropes, which blur boundaries and challenges notions of gender and sexuality. Her most famous photographs are a series of self-portraits taken mostly during the 1920s and 1930s. In these remarkable images she sports a shaved head and stares intensely into the camera, courting multiple guises and interpretations. Cahun died in 1954 but it wasn't until the 1990s that art historians began to seriously study and pay recognition to her powerful creative output.

Colin Campbell was born in Reston, Manitoba in 1942 and is considered to be one of the pioneers of video art in Canada. He gained his BFA from the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg in 1966 and his MFA from Claremont Graduate School in California in 1969. After a seven-year stint in Canada, Campbell returned to California in 1976, where he spent a year making a series of videos, *The Woman from Malibu*, which later became part of a selection of Canadian video art representing Canada at the Venice Biennale in 1980. He was known as a filmmaker, performance artist, writer, and critic, and from the mid-1980s he was active in AIDS-related

work. In 1991 the Winnipeg Art Gallery organized a major retrospective of his work. His videotapes and installations have been shown at major galleries around the world, including the National Gallery in Ottawa and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He died in 2001 of cancer.

Miss Lyndsay Ladobruk was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She has shown in many venues and has recently begun to create a national presence, with performances in Montreal, New York, and Vancouver. Miss Lyndsay is currently working on building an artist-run center dedicated to building community for performance artists in Winnipeg as well as a continuation of her own artistic practices. Miss Lyndsay Ladobruk is a former student of the School of Art and is one of the founding members and Artistic Director of the Central Canadian Center for Performance.

Dominique Rey is a painter, photographer, video artist, and performance artist. Her work has been exhibited across Canada and in the United States, Germany, and Slovakia. Her solo exhibitions include the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Plug In ICA, Clark Gallery, Michael Gibson Gallery, Alternator Gallery, Gallery TPW, Truck Gallery, Gallery One One One, Gallery 1C03, and La Maison des artistes. A selection of her awards and grants

include the Canada Council for the Arts, the Manitoba Arts Council, the Winnipeg Arts Council, the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, and La Fondation Ricard. Her work has been reviewed in *The Globe and Mail*, *Border Crossings*, *Frieze*, *Canadian Art*, and the *Winnipeg Free Press*, among others. She holds an MFA in Photography from Bard College in New York and an MFA in New Media from the Transart Institute, Berlin. Dominique Rey was named Winnipeg's Visual Arts Ambassador for the 2010 Cultural Capital of Canada. She is a graduate of the School of Art and currently on faculty there.

Janet Werner was born in Winnipeg and lives and works in Montreal, where she teaches at Concordia University. Her work as a painter focuses on the fictional portrait as a vehicle to explore notions of subjectivity and desire. Werner holds an MFA from Yale University and a BFA from the Maryland Institute. In Canada she has had solo shows at the Art Gallery of Windsor; SBC Gallery, Montreal; The Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; The Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon; The Ottawa Art Gallery, and Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg. Internationally her work has been included in the Prague Biennale and in the survey exhibition *Oh, Canada*, at Mass MoCa in North Adams, Massachusetts. Her work is included in the upcoming survey show of contemporary Canadian painting *PaintingProject /*

Project Peinture at Galerie de l'UQAM, Montreal, in spring 2013. A travelling solo exhibition surveying her recent production is currently on view at the College Art Galleries, University of Saskatchewan, and will travel to the Esker Foundation in Calgary and Galerie de l'UQAM, Montreal, in 2013. Werner's work is in the collections of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Musée du Québec, Musée d'art contemporain, Owens Art Gallery, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Mendel Art Gallery, Winnipeg Art Gallery and numerous corporate collections.



CLAUDE CAHUN

COLIN CAMPBELL

**MISS LYNDSAY
LADOBROUK**

DOMINIQUE REY

JANET WERNER