

# THE LIVING IN THE DEAD

By Rita Marhaug

Stone and bronze sculpture has portrayed the human body as resistant and unchangeable for thousands of years; a condition that far surpasses the elastic and yielding nature of our transient reality. The soft curves of the Kritios Boy<sup>1</sup>, fashioned from hard marble, exemplify Greek culture's conclusion of the truth, the good and the beautiful in one eternal image. This relationship between the dead, yet immortal sculpture and transitory human life has been both a source of religious belief, and essential material for artistic expression inside and outside of any religious framework. In the essence of this ancient practice lies the magical allure: to freeze and fortify the transient.

My first liquid work was based on the female menstrual cycle. Slacker inspired work was popular in Norwegian public art in the 90s. The focus was on young male identity and self-understanding; typical masculine sub-cultural roles and aesthetic practices, such as black metal music and skating, became a popular motif. Positions seen to challenge traditional adult roles, even to oppose the adult role to rest in infantile, irresponsible mode.

Female experience of girls on the verge of adolescence in the late 90s appeared to be the opposite of their male counterparts. Their attitudes and actions expressed the desire to grow up and create their own lives. 12 year old girls displayed their sanitary pad packets on their school desk tops as clear evidence of the passage from child to adult. While Knut Åsdam's cogent video work *Pissing* from 1995, clearly manifests a masculine anxiety of adulthood, with a character quite literally pissing his pants.

Intimate body change in adolescence is associated with both joy and anxiety, and the transformation clearly reveals the plastic and changeable nature of the body that is completely beyond our control. It's the message of life ahead, but also of eventual death. The blood that flows through all of our body tissue also relays this double meaning: Life runs throughout the body, but if too much runs out, it will die.

The lines of European civilization stretch back to Minoan and Egyptian high culture. Our knowledge of this distant past lies in remnants of architecture, objects and images. Body life and death feature high in these casually preserved items. To maintain body in image and in actual form, can be seen as a guarantee of both life and death. To preserve; to provide physical form appears precarious: A physical form<sup>2</sup> that surpasses the volatile, changeable

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<sup>1</sup> The marble **Kritios Boy** or **Kritian Boy** belongs to the Early Classical period of [ancient Greek sculpture](#); "the first beautiful nude in art", as [Kenneth Clark](#) thought,<sup>[1]</sup> it is a precursor to the later classical sculptures of athletes. The Kritian Boy is thus named because it is attributed on slender evidence to [Kritios](#) who worked together with [Nesiotes](#) (sculptors of [Harmodius and Aristogeiton](#)) or their school, from around 480 BC. The statue is considerably smaller than life-size at 1.17 m (3 ft 10 ins).(Wikipedia)

<sup>2</sup> A **mummy** is a deceased human or animal whose [skin](#) and [organs](#) have been preserved by either intentional or accidental exposure to [chemicals](#), extreme cold, very low [humidity](#), or lack of air, so that the recovered body will not decay further if kept in cool and dry conditions. Some authorities restrict the use of the term to bodies deliberately [embalmed](#) with chemicals, but the use of the word to cover accidentally [desiccated](#) bodies goes back to at least 1615 CE.

Mummies are typically divided into one of two distinct categories: anthropogenic or spontaneous. Anthropogenic mummies were deliberately created by the living for any number of reasons, the most common being for religious purposes. (Wikipedia)

and liquid. Forms of stone and bronze last for centuries but the rituals have all but disappeared, fragmented images and mythical stories wrapped in silence.

#### THE DEAD OF LIFE

The body has a fundamental duality: life and death, subject and object. "From dust you have come. To dust you shall return. From dust you shall rise again." Three handfuls of earth symbolise the movement life – death – life. These words are familiar from the funeral ritual, and are yet another cultural reference to the physical body's transient existence, and potential salvation and resurrection on judgment day.

The work *Puls* was created as an image of the world; nature and culture, flowing through the body. The university library's postmodern garden was the setting for *Puls* in May 2012. My white clothed figure strapped five containers holding five litres of green liquid to one of the garden's lush trees. Thin tubes from the containers were inserted into openings in the white clothing and one into the mouth. The character was then attached to the tree by the 2 metre long tubes. The containers were opened and within 30 minutes the green liquid turned the white clothing green.

Blood versus chlorophyll on white, both create a strong visual contrast but they have different interpretations.

#### NORWEGIAN LIQUID

The performance series *Norwegian Liquid* has developed over several years to encompass a number of elements it has met along the way. Black and white; visually and linguistically, an ultimate contrast. Skin; the interface between individual and world. Identity; central in my art production in a variety of contexts, and especially in my early works focusing on femininity and masculinity, children and adults.

*Norwegian Liquid* deals with the identity in tension between individual and nation. Our national and individual understanding often runs in contrast. The same can be said about reality and idea of nation, as well as of individual: Norway is presented as a country of pristine nature, while in fact we are the seventh largest oil exporter in the world. The individual is pulled between a traditionally moderate culture with roots in the rural, and a limitless, international, post-industrial infotainment society.

The black oil soaking through the figure's white clothing is reminiscent of *Puls*. The scene however, is a very different one on a summer day in 2011: One of the many beaches on Gimsøya in Lofoten, overlooking the Norwegian Sea and the Nordland VI, VII and Troms II<sup>3</sup>; the battlefield between oil production and nature conservation.

The oil changes white to black, and eventually skin and sand turn black with oil. Corresponding to the blood volume of an adult, five litres of oil are soaked through, and then the figure moves backwards into the sea and is swallowed by the waves. The body is eventually washed up on the beach.

One year later and the strategy has changed, the situation has become both more realistic and surreal. My old enamel bath is placed on our boat landing, on the north side of Vestvågøy,

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<sup>3</sup>Hovedkonklusjon fra «Petroleumsressurser i havområdene utenfor Lofoten, Vesterålen og Senja» rapport bestilt av Oljedirektoratet på vegne av den norske regjeringen.

[http://www.regjeringen.no/Upload/MD/Vedlegg/hav\\_vannforvaltning/Forvaltningsplanen\\_Barentshavet/rapporter/OD\\_seismikk\\_rapport\\_150410.pdf](http://www.regjeringen.no/Upload/MD/Vedlegg/hav_vannforvaltning/Forvaltningsplanen_Barentshavet/rapporter/OD_seismikk_rapport_150410.pdf)

bathed in sunshine on a July day in 2012. The bathtub is filled with a barrel of oil<sup>4</sup>. The figure arrives on the little white beach and lowers herself into the black liquid filled bathtub. When she emerges from the bathtub she wades into the sea and swims.

The bathtub scenario was recreated in the Bonington Gallery<sup>5</sup> for the exhibition opening on 8th January 2013. With a large audience in attendance, the performance took on a very different context from six months earlier. This time, with the gallery's physical presence and the strong smell of the oil, the performance provided a variety of associations and interpretations that never came into play in Lofoten.

Although the English public is no stranger to oil political economy, there were more existential and/or abstract aspects of the work that came to light within the gallery walls. The relationships between the solid and the liquid, the oil and the body, the dry, fair skin and the wet, shiny oil, activated a restlessness of terms such as black-white and subject-object in the viewer.

#### WE NOTICE THE WORLD

During the course of the *Norwegian Liquid* works, other process materials and situations emerged. The relationship between oxygen and carbon in the life process, most clearly exemplified through breathing, has become an aspect of artistic trial. The other more subtle substance that runs in and out of our bodies; the air we breathe in and out. Air, oxygen and carbon dioxide, which binds large organic systems together.

The exhibition *Liquid Bodies, Solid Minds* combines a variety of items, some seen before, some new, into a larger organic whole; an installation together with works by colleague Tracy Kelly. Black oil seeps out through the gallery wall and slowly stains a white carpet black. The adjoining walls have been painted with the artist's skin color, and an opening night performance will transform a black figure into a white figure. Falling, floating condoms will live their own life in the room, while a St. Bernard dog quietly guards the exhibition from a black circular carpet.

The challenge remains in applying poetic language to a political and economic phenomenon, which, in a complex world, is as abstract as it is concrete. The desire is that the artistic results provide the viewer with a room for reflection.

Rita Marhaug, June 2013

*Translation Gillian Carson*

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<sup>4</sup> International measurement for trading raw petroleum oil is in barrels. One British barrel equals 42 US [gallons](#) of 158,987 liter

<sup>5</sup> Nottingham Trent University's exhibition space where college Traci Kelly and I opened the exhibition *From Where I Stand I Can See You*. The show lasted until 9th of February.