

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Sophie Milner: Unstitching By Ann McCoy

‘One afternoon, after finishing a cup of coffee in her living room,
Greta discovered how to unstitch herself. Her clothes, skin and hair fell from her
like the peeled rind of a fruit, and her true body stepped out.’¹

Sophie Milner has chosen the exhibition title *Unstitching* tributing a similarly called dystopian short story by Camilla Grudova, where women ‘unstitch’ themselves as an art of feminist liberation. To ‘unstitch’ also implies the use of hands, craft, and new ways of seeing. The ‘unstitched’ are exposed and freed from the persona associated with public expectations. In Milner’s case one might add the female form is liberated from portrayals by male painters and the male gaze. Exposure and vulnerability are part of the female experience, and Milner’s painterly explorations are deeply psychological. The feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray in her reexamination of Plato’s cave describes the cave as the place of origin, a cosmogonic womb. Milner’s semi-transparent bodies feel like wombs, containers for a uniquely feminine history positioned outside of male dominated painterly traditions. Milner’s bodies are internalized landscapes, microcosms, and containers representing the feminine psyche.

Certainly, Marcel Duchamp in his *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) abstracted the female form. He joined the Cubists as they danced in and around the figure, and flux became the dominate principle. For the Cubists fragmentation was common, as was a kind of transparency. Milner’s figures and body fragments are different, they are rounded, not angular or mechanistic. I was reminded of Medieval statues of Madonnas, where the belly could open with a hinged door and show a child within. The artist says she has also employed the “motif of swelling bellies as pregnant or ‘full’ - a metaphor for the creative potential of art making, giving birth, and creativity.” I also thought of a Buddha I had seen in *National Geographic* that when x-rays revealed treasures

¹ Grudova, Camilla, *The Doll’s Alphabet*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017: p11.

hidden within. Seeing Milner's semi-transparent figure fragments, the viewer feels them to be pregnant with sacred relics and histories and engaged in an act of mythological re-birthing.

Alberto Giacometti, in his drawings, strips away the persona, leaving us with the inner structures of the musculature. In Milner's work, this stripping is done not by the ripping away of flesh, but through transparent layering. We glimpse beneath the persona through the transparent veils. Each body part becomes a portal revealing an inner landscape. There is an interplay between the scenes glimpsed beneath the transparent layers in the spaces surrounding the figures and the suggestions of happenings within the forms. Inner space and outer space, macrocosm and microcosm are in dialogue.

Transparency is key to her new work. Jean Gebser, the Swiss philosopher writes about a transparency in art and architecture as representing a new spiritual dimensionality. Sophie Milner's representations of women have a tenderness, Eros, and feeling, as well as portraying a spiritual dimension. The artist has been influenced by metaphysical painters like Agnes Pelton, another master of transparency. Both women use color in a symbolic way. Sienna, turquoise, and cobalt blue - that color villages were painted to protect them from the angel of death; Milner's colors are earthy and alchemical.

In this new series of works, Sophie Milner has taken the viewer on a voyage sailing in and out of the female body, on a flight of the soul. The viewer feels like they are floating in a timeless space created by the artist. This is a voyage worth taking, sailing in a distinctly feminine realm.

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