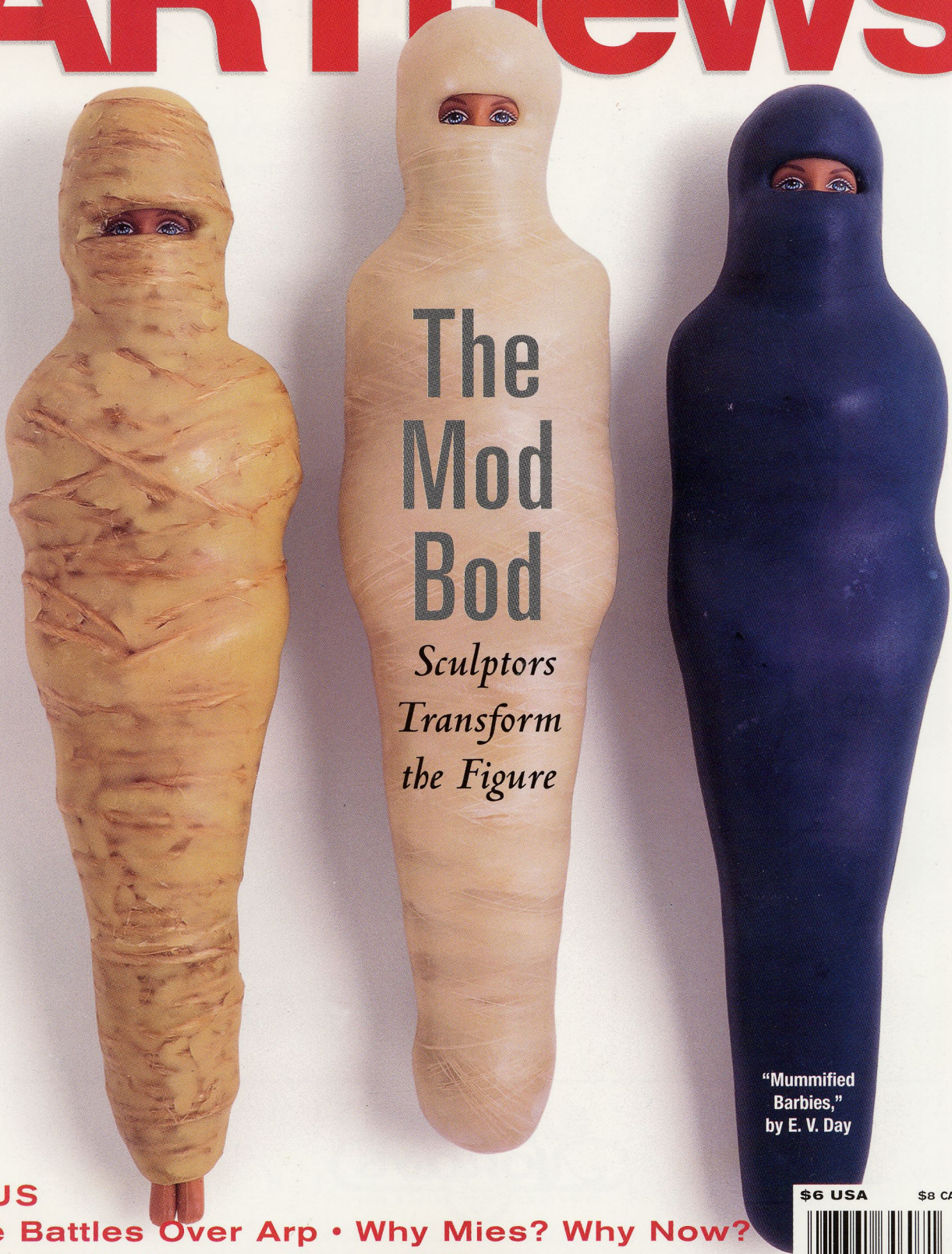


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## The Mod Bod

*Sculptors  
Transform  
the Figure*

"Mummified  
Barbies,"  
by E. V. Day

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# THE MOD BOD

*Modified, magnified, dissected, and erected, the body takes on unexpected shapes when sculptors use it as a metaphor for emotions*

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

In Jeanne Silverthorne's framed wall reliefs, caramel-tone rubber swirls and swells in surrealistic landscapes. Only after reading their titles—*Sweat Pore, Ulcer, Bacteria Promoting, More Collagen*—is it clear that these alien terrains represent microscopic passages of the human body enlarged to mind-boggling proportions.

"These pieces are looking at what we are but in a way that makes us seem overwhelmingly strange," says Silverthorne, who has long used rubber as her sculptural material and finds that its fleshlike quality works as a natural allusion to the body. "In some way, our sense of self gets diminished by seeing ourselves as nothing but enlarged gall bladders or ulcers. I'm interested in these being not just literal images of the body, which of course they are, but also objective correlates for emotional states. The ulcer has to do with anxiety, and the sweat pores have to do with labor. In my new pieces, the wall of the gall bladder is actually called *Thin-Skinned* or *Galled*. Bone is called *Edgy*."

Body exploration is ground zero in contemporary art, particularly in sculpture, with its inherent three-dimensionality. "It's hard to think of an artist today who isn't referencing the body in some way," says Michael Auping, chief curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. "It's all about the body when you go to the doctor. It's all about the body when you look through *Vanity Fair*. The body is the conduit for all our hopes and worst fears. It houses the disease that can't be cured."

While many sculptors tackle the body in its hyperliteral form—from

COURTESY HENRY UEBACH ARCHITECTURE, NEW YORK

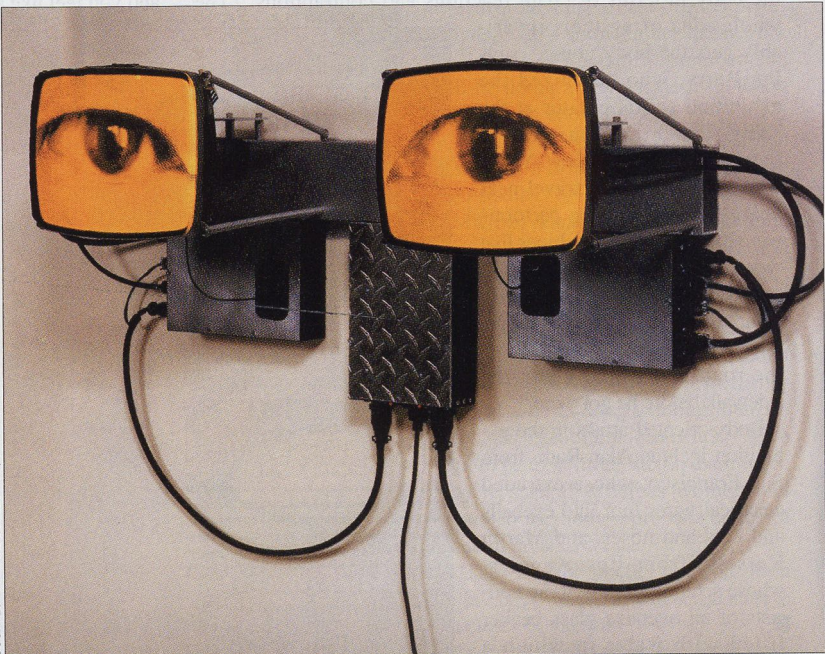


**OPPOSITE** In E. V. Day's series "Mummified Barbies," 1993–98, plastic dolls are wrapped with string or covered in beeswax.  
**ABOVE** *Wall of Bladder (Medium)*, 2000, by Jeanne Silverthorne.

Charles Ray's mannequins to Damien Hirst's giant cast of an anatomical model—others, like Silverthorne, refer to the body in more metaphoric terms. Whether by magnifying it, disassembling it, shrouding it, or defining it by its absence, a lyrical breed of sculptor is transforming the body beyond a physical state to a psychological state in powerful ways.

An important progenitor of this type of work is Hans Bellmer, who in Nazi-era Germany constructed and photographed two life-size female dolls with movable body parts that he manipulated into disturbingly surrealistic and erotic configurations—two sets of legs and genitals sprouting from a headless torso, for instance. Dramatizing intangible sexual longings and male domination over the female body, Bellmer's dolls speak directly to sculptors today, including Kiki Smith. Smith's exhibition of puppet sculptures and photographs, on view through the tenth of this month at New York's International Center of Photography, is running concurrently with a Bellmer retrospective that includes his only surviving doll and two torso sculptures.

Other artists seminal in using the body as a metaphor for psychological conditions are Bruce Nauman, whose severed heads are forever frustrated in their inability to communicate with the rest of the body, and Louise Bourgeois, whose assemblages of cast body fragments and objects inside cubelike interiors, or "cells," as she calls them, are the symbolic plasma of an individual. "Louise Bourgeois is definitely the mother of us," says Petah Coyne, referring to sculptors like herself who work in emotional territory. "I think we are trying to be as expressive as the painters, but with something that's much more physical and takes tremendously longer to execute, so it's very difficult to hold the same pitch. Some are really restrained, like Judith Shea, or right in your face, like Kiki Smith, but we're all getting at the same thing."

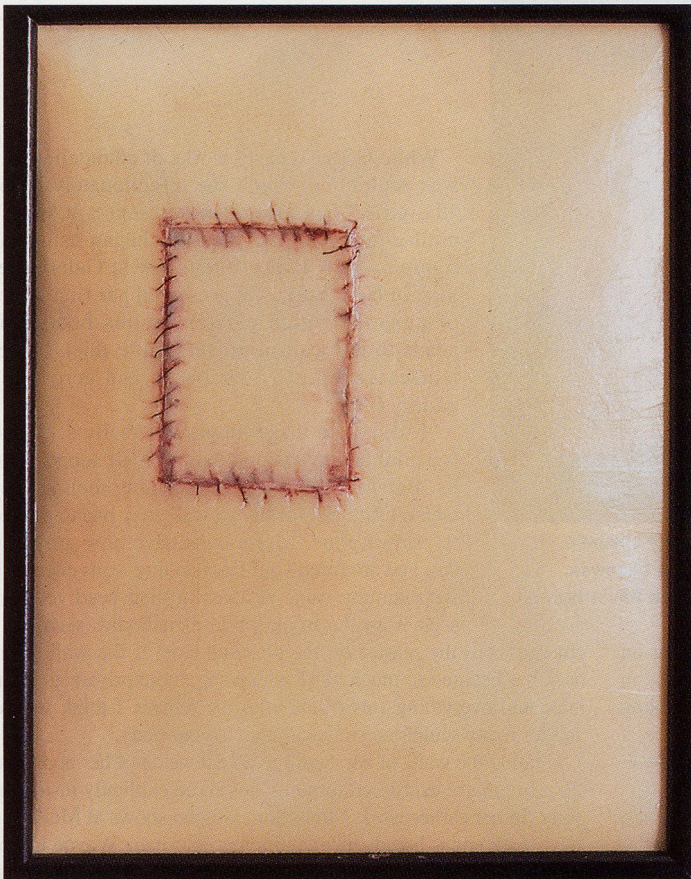


**Alan Rath works with eyes wide open in *Watcher*, 1998, an electronic sculpture with CRT (cathode ray tube) monitors.**

While Coyne's early works of chandelier-like wax sculptures, which she affectionately terms "the girls," had an organic presence, it wasn't until a few years ago that she began using the figure overtly. In her 1998 show at Galerie Le-long in New York, she presented her first series of nuns, in which plaster figures bent their heads to the wall in prayer, while thick horse-hair cascaded off their backs and across the gallery floor.

"I wanted to make these nuns really sexy and beautiful and everything they weren't supposed to be. But I remember at the opening feeling they weren't safe just facing the wall, they had to go into it," says Coyne, whose nuns have now grown in size and are fused with freestanding walls encrusted with gummy wax. Vestiges of their head veils are seen from the front, while their bodies seemingly emerge from the plaster on the opposite side of the wall. "The back has become so much more interesting, more private and intimate and everything I associate with the female. I think for me and for many sculptors, your sculpture is your body."

Treating the walls of her studio as an extension of her body was what originally led Silverthorne to look more explicitly inside the body. In her earlier work, Silverthorne—who shows at McKee in New York and is having an exhibition at Shoshana Wayne in Los Angeles in November—made rubber casts of the industrial wiring systems typical of New York artists' studios and snaked them throughout rooms like neurons and entrails. One of her wire installations, accompanied by body-part reliefs, will swing from the atrium into the galleries at the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown, Massachusetts, as part of a group show



Sarah Lovitt shapes wax into a skinlike surface in *Untitled*, 2000.

titled "Chain Reaction," which opens the 21st of next month.

This exhibition pairs Rube Goldberg cartoons from the early 20th century with work by contemporary artists who explore the body in terms of chain reactions and contraptions. "The whole idea of systems invariably gets the body going," says Ian Berry, who organized the exhibition and is curator at the Tang Teaching Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York, where the show will travel next year. "Rube Goldberg cartoons were often of goofy machines that were extensions of the body—something a character would wear on his head, for instance, that extended five blocks down the road and would clean the sidewalk before he got there."

Body-oriented artists in the exhibition include Alan Rath, from San Francisco, whose extruded electrical wires turn into eyeballs and ears and noses, and Martin Kersels, from Los Angeles, whose sculpture in the show consists of an oversize glass beaker filled with water in which a speaker is submerged with a recording of Kersels's voice blasting continuously, "I'm trying

to raise the temperature of this water by yelling at it!" The sculpture is attached to a thermometer that doesn't change, mocking the futility of his action.

Also on view will be Tim Hawkinson's *Signature*, a sculpture cobbled from a school desk with a spinning turntable and pen apparatus that scrawls the artist's signature on adding-machine tape. The signed slip is then chopped off and falls into a pile on the floor—a mechanical self-portrait churning out endless surrogates. Hawkinson, a Los Angeles-based artist who shows at Ace, rigs up all manner of exhaling, twitching automatons. His gargantuan installation *Uberorgan*, at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, through November, is like a voyage through the body cavity, with 12 bus-size inflated bladders made of translucent fabric. Pumped up with air from a master udder, they emit the tones of the musical scale through long tubes. It is the body as instrument, at once technically matter-of-fact and wailingly visceral.

Like Hawkinson's clamorous, unwieldy organisms, E. V. Day's dresses and wet suits explode the boundaries of the body. She made a spectacular entrance at last year's Whitney Biennial with her incarnation of Marilyn Monroe's iconic white dress blowing up in the air over a subway grating. Literally blasting the dress to bits and suspending them piece by piece in bodily form from a matrix of fishing lines, Day released the implied figure in a loaded moment of ecstasy and violence.

Her dissected wet suits, strung up on wire inside metal frameworks that look like glassless aquariums, suggest exoskeletons of some highly evolved giant insects or a new biological breed. "When you wear a wet suit, it compresses your body, and you feel like a rubber band and as if you actually could jump



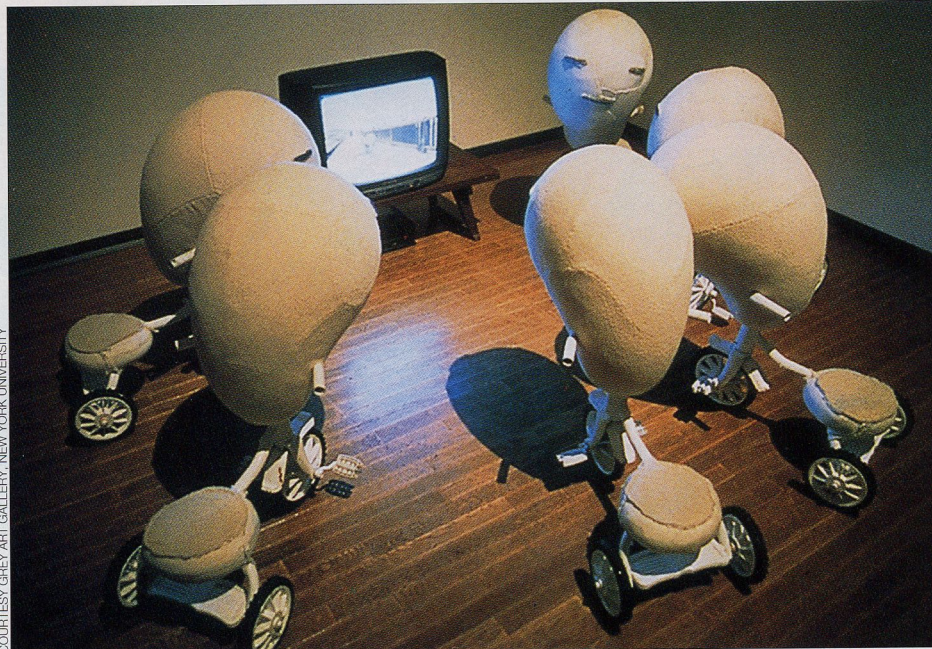
In Beverly Semmes's *Watching Her Feat*, 2000, stuffed tubes of fluorescent yellow nylon suggest intestines or excrement.

over a building,” says Day, who shows at Henry Urbach Architecture in New York and is doing a large-scale project for the Whitney at Philip Morris in September. “I was interested in transforming what the suits look like into the way you feel when you wear them.”

New York-based artist Beverly Semmes is well known for her use of garments to define the absent body—dresses hung on the wall and spilling out across the floor in a sea of diaphanous fabric. Her exhibition this spring at Leslie Tonkonow in New York—derived from a show last fall at Philadelphia’s Fabric Workshop and Museum titled “Watching Her Feat”—pushed Semmes’s work deeper into the territory of the body. Giant stuffed tubes of fluorescent yellow nylon were coiled into mountainous forms suggestive of intestines or excrement. A gallery attendant seated nearby and dressed in the same material became an extension of the neon mound. She represented the artist “watching her feat”—taking what’s inside her, literally and creatively, and letting it mushroom beyond her body in spectacular color and dimension.

Two newcomers to the art world, Sarah Lovitt and Risa Sato, made impressive splashes this year with their highly original anatomical sculptures. Lovitt had her debut at the Mitchell-Innes & Nash booth in the Armory Show last February in New York. Two large rib cages, fabricated from fine metal tubing and rubber, transformed rigid bone into an animate substance. One dangled from the ceiling like a fragile, naked dancer while the other was on the floor, collapsed in a jumble. Lovitt’s framed wall reliefs—smoothly molded cream-colored wax punctuated with knobby impressions of a spinal column or a series of surgical stitches closing up a small square wound—speak of pain and metamorphosis in a minimal vocabulary.

Sato’s installation was the standout in “The First Steps: Emerging Artists from Japan,” at the Grey Art Gallery in New York this spring. One of seven artists selected by an international jury from an original pool of over a thousand, Sato, who lives in Tokyo, uses strangely affecting kidney-shaped heads in her sculptures and performances. At Grey, six of these bulbous forms, made from parachute silk, with horizontal lines for eyes and mouths stitched with black thread, were propped on tiny tricycle bodies. They would have been cute if they hadn’t



The body takes on a bulbous, childlike form in Risa Sato's 1999 installation *Risa Campaign in California—Mother's Life*.

also been slightly menacing, huddled together in a conspiratorial circle in this installation, titled *Risa Campaign in California—Mother's Life*. In a performance piece, Sato went to visit her estranged mother in the United States and peddled through the suburban streets of California on one of these creatures.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the sculptors exploring the body as a metaphor for emotions are women. “I notice that my female friends and I talk differently than my male friends about sculpture and how we make it. It sounds so touchy-feely that it’s almost embarrassing,” laughs Coyne, who’s showing her latest work at Galerie Lelong in September and will be doing a large-scale installation for a group show opening in October at the Detroit Institute of Arts. “Men have such a different relationship with their bodies.”

Michael Auping concurs. “I do think women artists approach the body in a more metaphoric fashion than men,” he says. As a guest curator of the last Whitney Biennial, Auping juxtaposed one of Coyne’s nun pieces with Robert Gober’s installation incorporating casts of a child’s legs, noting their related yet dissonant qualities. “Men tend to be a bit more literal, even when they’re surreal, whereas women will approach the body more as a series of ethereal layers.

“That may be cliché, but you often do fall back on cliché when you start to get closer to the truth.” ■

*Hilarie M. Sheets, a contributing editor of ARTnews, wrote about landscape painting in the March issue.*



From Petah Coyne's "Nun" series, *Untitled #978, 1999–2000*.