**CORPUS**

**The anatomical reference in the title of the show – *Corpus*, the Latin word for “body” – could not be more explicit. Paolo Topy’s works of art have been brought together for this event at Area35ArtGallery because of what they have to say about his surprising rapport with the human body. His switching between representing and not-representing the body reveals a lot about his approach, research and proposals, as well, of course, as the meaning he gives to this uniquely personal and obsession-inducing vehicle.**

**This whole, this *corpus* in fact, is composed of 21 works made from 2012 to 2018. Each element contributes to the reflections proposed by the project’s guest curator: Yves Peltier, French art critic and director of Madoura – an art, history and creation space in Vallauris, France, who was invited by the gallery’s owners, Giacomo Marco Valerio and Florence Santini.**

**This show offers a rare opportunity for a dialogue with an artist, and through his intercession, for a peregrination leading to a surprising experience: meeting the other, that unknown whose too big, too cumbersome, too flagrant body is so often an obstacle.**

**Visiting this show offers a chance to bring one’s gaze to bear on the constant – and, it must be acknowledged, disconcerting – relationship that art, particularly Western art, maintains with the body, which it contributes both to revealing and to exploring.**

Representations of the body in early art are symbolic, related to the sacred. They gradually become more descriptive, allowing humans to assert their own consciousness of “being” and of their place in the world through their experience of it, the body being the object through which the world is experienced. In Ancient Greece and Rome, mankind aimed to become the measure of the world: realism and the search for perfect proportions in artistic creation express that rivalry with nature and the place mankind intended to take from that point forward. Later, Christianity would use representations of the body with greater ambivalence, hesitating between scorn and glorification. The body’s idealization during the Renaissance bears witness to a search for an ideal social image, for a society that could integrate every individual. It is worth noting that every kind of power structure has also taken advantage of systems of representation, within the boundaries of highly stereotyped codes. Later, the connections between different schools of thought, philosophical reflections and art would enable other representations of the body to be envisaged. In the end, art has contributed above all to enabling discourses about the body – be they magical, religious, political, or philosophical – to be materialized and inter-connected. It is a form of popularization of the experience of the body that it proposes through representations of these various forms of discourse, which were made accessible to all in this way.

In technical terms, art has attempted to report on the objective and mechanist – physical-chemical, one might even say – vision that we have had of the body as an object over the course of advances in scientific, particularly anatomical, knowledge. Yet there has always been a gap between the reality of the body and its depicted image. It is there, in that space to explore, that the artist takes action, offering us access to other worlds within the realm of the senses. The artist’s action is physical as well. In the process of the emergence of the art, the artist’s own body is also at work. The body of the beholder, the spectator, is equally inevitable. The beholder is indeed called upon. They must position themselves, both intellectually and physically, relative to the proposition being made to them. Above and beyond the body or bodies represented, there is a multitude of other bodies. As we can see, it is difficult, well-nigh impossible to avoid bodies in art. In fact, it could even be asserted that without the body, there is no art.

Paolo Topy’s work is part of a historical continuum. His propositions do not sweep away or ignore the past, which, when needed, is integrated into the creative process through more or less explicit references, ranging from Antiquity to the avant-gardes of modern and contemporary creation. The continuum is also very personal. His permanent relationship to the body as a subject contributes greatly to that. That started very early on, and this exhibition could in fact have included emblematic older works, such as *Paride*, which dates back to 1998, and which offered an opportunity for Paolo Topy to explain his research into nudes:… *“These nudes do not stem in any way from an intention to reveal a certain kind of crude, organic beauty but rather from a desire to show how, in their simplicity, these same bodies ‘express’ and ‘bear witness’ to the deep humanity and personality of those who not do not just inhabit them. They are that body, freed of all social obligations and conventions.”*

Paolo Topy doesn’t settle for highlighting his subjects’ humanity through the agency of exposing their naked bodies. He explores the body, and in so doing, places it at the very heart of the reflections he offers about the world and our relationship to it, as well as to the other, with whom we share it. He extracts the body – that secret we each have, to quote Marcel Proust – from our intimate experience of it.

That is the case for *Casting,* from 2002, a group of 12 photographs in which models at a fashion casting call are still “raw material”. Not yet made up or clothed, bathed in a harsh light, they are presented head-on, without the slightest artifice, in their own underwear. The series emphasizes the commodification of the human body. These young women’s distinct personalities are already starting to fade. They all look more or less alike. Their bodies are frozen in rigid “poses” as they wait for the instant when “life,” or some simulacrum of it, will allow them to exist for the duration of a carefully orchestrated photograph. Who are these young women? What are their lives, their real lives, like? The marketplace couldn’t care less. Can we? Are we still capable of distinguishing truth from falsehood, of escaping from the clutches of marketing and publicity stratagems? Those are the questions that the artist invites us to reflect upon with this series which, clearly, is neutral in appearance only.

Although before he began to do that kind of work, Paolo Topy had the experience of shooting highly public figures – trying to reveal their true selves by exposing their naked bodies – he soon decided to shoot ordinary people only. His goal was to turn them into celebrities while revealing their “handicap,” i.e. their profound humanity. The body itself has a preponderant role in his strategy. For him, they were “stars.” For the artist, that sudden fame, an unexpected consequence of their anonymity and their “ordinary” lives, is in fact a “celebration.”

The work he produced in that period, including the the series *Staring Flowers,*with its 100+ images, *Eufrasia, Pet* and *Giuseppe,* as well as the series *Hope –* powerfully reveals that principle.

With *Staring Flowers,* in 2003, the bodies’ imperfections, stigmata and other of life’s scars are magnified by the presence of flowers. They signal and reveal the imperfections’ surprising beauty, enabling a catharsis that is enhanced by their fragile, ephemeral presence. Thus the damaged or simply imperfect body bears witness, with a certain poetry, to the vagaries of the sometimes difficult path of life. That path is often strewn with hardships and suffering that wind up becoming essential components of who we are: fragile human beings with precarious, uncertain fates. Each of the works of art in this series shows only a part of a body. That fragmentation expresses the anonymity of pain and suffering.

*Eufrasia* is taken from a series produced in 2004, in contact with the world of the disabled. An imperceptible shift occurs in this image, which shows us someone with a disjointed, discordant body. We are taken aback, surprised. We feel like the artist is trying to provoke us. It’s true, he is indeed trying to provoke a reaction from us. This subject’s appearance doesn’t correspond to the norms of our perfection-besotted society. The disharmony that emanates from the body represented in this work is the consequence of the hyperrealism that is the nature of photography. The subject is shown as is, without detour or distraction. Paolo Topy upends our archaic conception of beauty, one that has traditionally been attached to representations of the body. By those criteria, this woman would be ugly. She would be a monster. And yet, a singular beauty emanates from this image. Her stance, arms raised, simulating dancing or taking flight; her little-girl dress with its little white collar delicately echoing her sheer knee socks, stand those norms on their head thanks to the poetry they generate. The intrusion of that poetry means that this person’s handicap is no longer perceived as such, but rather as a hard-to-characterize strangeness. Our perception, disturbed, is no longer corrupted. The difference becomes the “marvelous,” a source of fascination and attraction; the fascination and attraction that children feel spontaneously for imaginary worlds and the sometimes strange characters that inhabit them. The fragility moves us, “provoking” a reaction that is both unexpected and positive.

Above and beyond the caustic atmosphere in the series *Pet,* produced in 2004 and composed of dual portraits of all sorts of animals – including toy ones – with their naked owners, Topy’s work raises the question of the ambiguous status of that strange machine known as the human body. It is ruled by the same mechanisms as animals’ bodies are. In that sense, we are clearly members of the animal kingdom. And yet, as the home of our thoughts, reason, intelligence and free will, the body is the very symbol of our humanity. The body is “a *machine that moves of its own accord,”* as Descartes said in a letter to the Marquis of Newcastle on November 23, 1646. Our humanity doesn’t prevent a kind of madness in the relationship we maintain with our four-legged companions. Mankind transforms and humanizes its environment. Animals, on the other hand, adapt to it. This humanization of our environment and of the beings that populate it verges on “a kind of folly,” which hasn’t been new since Henri III introduced follies to his court. In this series, the folly is openly displayed and “owned.” A tender affection that animals adapt to easily is woven into the folly. In a case like this, openly acknowledging one’s own folly can be the best way to achieve fulfillment, happiness and serenity… or at least to project them, lacking the physical and emotional bonds that are so often frayed or missing with our fellow man.

From 2005, *Giuseppe* shows a naked man, posing in front of the cold, anonymous façades of buildings that close off the space behind him. The work raises the issue of the body’s relationship to architecture and of the space granted to human beings in urban settings. The facades’ hermetic nature seems to be resisting the body, even though architecture is meant to be an extension of it. That impression of resistance is what grants greater reality to the body of the man in the foreground. Built by and for human beings, these buildings nevertheless bear witness to our erring ways. The obvious bond between the body and architecture seems to be broken. Rigid and cold, the view erases any sense of life, which can only cry out that it exists through the body of an elderly man, worn down by a borderline-hostile environment. Even a weakened, fragile body seems like a refuge, the ideal home for a self that accepts the modesty of its condition as a human being. While the body, by its very nature, is a problematic object in the sense that it raises questions, it also remains a reality that has faithfully accompanied us since the beginning. It is our natural habitat, like a shell for a mollusk. Paolo Topy seems to be telling us that here, echoing Francis Ponge’s comments in his poem *Notes pour un coquillage (Notes for a Shell)* from his 1942 book Le parti pris des choses (The Voice of Things): *I wish that man, instead of those enormous monuments that bear witness only to the grotesque disproportion of his imagination (…) would put some care into creating (…) a home that’s not much bigger than his body, than all his imaginations, his reasons being included therein, that he set his mind to adjustment, not disproportion — or, at the very least, that his mind would recognize the limits of the body that holds it up**...*

In his 2006 series *Hope*, each protagonist was asked to close their eyes. We, the spectators, are also led to make a wish, to hope, and to look at other people in a new light, especially those we pass by on a daily basis but rarely pay much attention to. Like the concierge in an apartment building, for instance. It is precisely that change in our gaze, that new attention brought to bear on others that offers hope for a different condition for us all. Our body is solicited through a symbolic gesture. The body is also where our thoughts, which guide our actions, reside. The artist makes a commitment and urges us to do the same. The body takes on a mental aspect. The protagonists’ beauty lies not in their individuality, but in their being part of a larger structure: a different body from the one belonging to the individuals that compose it, a system of interactions, a network of exchange connected by a single project and a single ideal.

*Exotica*, from 2014, constitutes a major tuning point in Paolo Topy’s approach. For the first time, he toys with evacuating the representation of the body by introducing a certain doubt about its reality. Is that silhouette a pattern printed on the fabric, a shadow projected by a backlit subject placed behind it, or the shadow of the person beholding the work? The space created by those questions becomes a place of experimentation. Doubt is cast on our own perception of the subject represented by the silhouette. The space is increased. The boundary between internal and external becomes blurred. The space becomes complex. It might include the subject placed behind the curtain, or the viewer, who melts into the decor. The image becomes the site of a projection of the body: projection of the subject’s, who is placed beyond it; and of our own body, which is erased and becomes perceptible only by projection. We don’t know where the shadow ends or where the printed fabric begins. Shadows and leaf pattern intertwine and inter-penetrate. We no longer know who is who or where. In this confusion, this deliberately provoked instability of our thoughts and perceptions, we become the other. The collapse of our certitudes enables an unexpected expression of our humanity.

Paolo Topy does use the medium of photography, granted, but he slips from the grasp of photography as a genre. Each of his pieces is the outcome of a long reflection that leads, first of all to a mental construction that the photographic act reveals and makes visible. That act, reduced to the bare minimum, bears witness to a reality that the artist generally refuses to disrupt with the slightest stylistic effect. For him, the piece is not only the subject of the photograph but also both the experience and the discourse he organizes in connection with it, rather than the technical achievement.

The piece that opens this exhibition illustrates that modus operandi. It is a monumental triptych slyly titled *Les Megères (The Shrews)*. Three busts from Ancient Rome have been photographed in a direct, cold, frontal – one could almost say “raw” way, as though for a museum inventory. Paolo Topy creates a *mise en abyme* from the relationship we maintain with how the other – in this case, an other who has disappeared, ancient Romans – thinks about and sees human anatomy and how it is represented. In Ancient Rome, out of a concern for idealization, representations of bodies were partially or entirely subjected to strict rules of proportion: a quest for perfection was the rule. Although the busts are realistic portraits, in which each woman’s unique character clearly shines through, these three “shrews” are no exception to that rule. Paolo Topy makes this his own piece by also revealing the unexpected, i.e. the liveliness, the profoundly human aspect, which, despite the highly coded system of representation, manages to express itself, to travel through time and to unveil characters that were part of everyday life in Ancient Rome, as they still are in contemporary Italy.

Further on, with *Theater*, we are invited to reflect upon the possibilities for exploiting representations of the body for specific purposes. Influenced by Christian philosophy, for the centuries from the Middle Ages until the return of Classicism, bodies were represented, not to be contemplated admiringly, but to inspire compassion in the “spectator.” For it is truly a performance that is being played out here: the sculptor’s image of a dead Christ has been organized, orchestrated, dramatized. Everything – from the body’s wan complexion to the drapes that evoke a stage curtain, via the posture of abandonment to death, and the presence of the stigmata of the passion – expresses the desire by those who commission works of art like this one to organize and manipulate the viewer’s emotions. Paolo Topy takes that strategy to its logical conclusion. He gives his offering the aspect of an ordinary “photo,” a snapshot that any tourist strolling through the place where the sculpture is on display might take. Here, he makes it his own “work” through his critical reading and deconstruction of a phenomenon and his clearly displayed intention to share his own ideas about it. In this case, those ideas would seem to be a critique that is admittedly acerbic, yet amused as well. Technically, he goes for complete neutrality, reducing the photographic act to its simplest expression. Contrary to the proposition underlying this sculpture, he leaves the interpretation of his proposition up to the beholder, offering the possibility to really notice something obvious that now has value as a historic reality. Free of any artifice, the image within the image gains the clarity of the naïve purity of the generations who came to kneel before it. Yet another opportunity to encounter the other.

*Cerise de printemps (Spring Cherry)* constitutes a key moment in our journey through the exhibition. Its central location, behind curtains, is explicit in that respect. It is an allusion to Gustave Courbet’s famous painting *L'Origine du monde (The Origin of the World)* and its first owner, the Turkish-Egyptian diplomat Khalil-Bey (1831-1879), a flamboyant figure on the Paris social scene in the 1860s who built a singular art collection devoted to celebrating the female body. Here, with *Cerise de printemps*, there’s nothing sublime, no erotic obsession. The genitals are discreetly shielded from view by underwear from a supermarket. The indecency comes instead from the fact that Paolo Topy has replaced the feeling of awkwardness with a celebration of a certain social reality. This is the body of a woman of color, a mother whose plumpness and stretch marks express the difficult lives of women of modest means who have to both work and raise children, often on their own. Here, the body is accepted without hypocrisy or false modesty. It acquires value by affirming or even demanding.

Except for a single piece, all the artwork in the rest of the exhibition has in common the absence of representation of the body. From there on in, the body is referred to, or suggested – like in *Workers*, a series produced with industrial rubber gloves in which, in a ploy that is atypical for him, Paolo Topy arranged the subject that is presented and photographed. This iconoclastic gesture evokes the modernist movements that, in turn, deconstructed, fragmented and deformed – in a nutshell, manipulated – the body throughout the 20th century. Despite being absent, the body is still very present through evocation alone: the point of the gloves is to protect it from a dangerous environment. Another body bursts into this series in an unexpected manner: the artist’s, who acts upon the gloves through the gesture of arranging them as a subject to be photographed. That gesture, the artist’s physical intervention, echoes the thought process, the mental organization that systematically precedes the photographic act, which simply reveals.

Further on, *Cotton Bud,* from the *Everyday* series, summons the image of the body in a surprising way. Because this Q-tip swab was chosen by Paolo Topy, because of the way it is presented – larger than life and over a white background evoking the white-cube concept – and because of the artist’s discourse, the object becomes a quasi-sculptural work of art, an allusion to the neo-realists and to Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades. The vision of this “fragment from everyday life” is fascinating: it summons up the characteristic ambiguity in the relationship we maintain with the body, including our own: a relationship whose complexity – somewhere between fascination and repulsion, disgust even though it can be a source of pleasure – is fascinating in and of itself.

In *Dress*, the image of the body is spectral. An item of clothing, presented – or rather staged – in the window of a couture boutique, a cold and calculated, rigid setting has been deliberately dramatized by the artist. This piece exposes the mercantile strategies connected to the body, through something whose primary purpose is to protect it: clothing. Considering the financial stakes of the fashion industry, the body becomes a support for colossal interests, an abstract object without individuality, in the image of the mannequin that is partially swallowed by shadows in this image.

With humor and tremendous insight, Paolo Topy says *Goodbye* to that body in an eponymous series produced in a shelter for migrants. These articles of clothing, hanging on coat hooks or draped over fans to dry, express the fragility and precariousness of the lives of these human beings that so many people wish would leave, would just disappear. The body is also that of the other, with whom we often have contradictory, conflictual and complicated relationships. That relationship necessarily passes through our own body, which, in and of itself – like the same, the self – is a permanent source of questioning, exploration and even ignorance. How can we apprehend the other, recognize them in their existence when we ignore everything, or nearly, about oneself?

With *Soap Opera*, Paolo Topy invites us to consider the complicated, or even stormy bonds between men and women. “Soap Operas,” radio or TV series that were originally sponsored by soap brands, represent an iconic image of those relationships, which are often on the cusp of being conflictual. Love, hate, rivalry and jealousy are generally the main ingredients of soaps, which are usually based on seriously archaic models of gender relations. Through a shrewd semantic shift with more than a touch of irony, this piece brings to mind the verbal or physical domestic violence that so few homes manage to avoid, in which bodies purposely become veritable weapons, or on the contrary, targets of that violence. Here, the shower becomes a place of refuge: a space shared by both sexes, providing physical and mental shelter and hygiene. Both men and women tend to their sometimes wounded bodies there. They may even meet there in a moment of overcoming struggles and social archetypes. That healthy, egalitarian unisex aspect is implicit in this quietly poetic piece, in which allusions to both sexes intertwine vicariously through the objects visible, forming an image that is playfully hybrid, suggestive and, one could even say, delightfully gendered.

*Beach* is a triptych composed of images of bodybuilders printed on beach towels. At first glance, the body is represented and even exacerbated. The image seems outrageously overdone, with its caricatured aspect bordering on the grotesque. It is false advertising. Are these even really bodies? Anatomically, the answer is yes, of course. But in intellectual, emotional and human terms, the answer is far less clear. In any case, the question can be legitimately raised. Through its very excess, its violence, the image kills the representation it was aiming to give of the body. It’s as though there were a sort of falsification. These caricatures of “bodies” are more like slabs of meat that express how humanity has been drawn off course by its desires and corollary obsessions. Humanity cannibalized by its own sexual appetites for objects literally transformed into consumer products. These towels, bought at shops near the beach, will nevertheless enable people with normal bodies – bodies in which nature and perhaps a touch of laziness reign supreme – to sprawl uninhibitedly in the sun, literally covering up the craze for perfection, the obsession with youth and the which become physical torture for some people and are a source of emotional suffering for most of us.

*Without* comes from a group of imagesin which the favored display method – in a continuous line on all of the walls of a given space – was chosen to create an insistent rhythm, an allusion to the traditional configuration of beds in hospices, hospitals, homeless and migrant shelters, etc. Viewers, passing this row in review, find themselves in the position of visitors strolling from one bed to another. The beds are empty. Yet every one of them is a powerful evocation of the human body. The sheets bear lasting traces of that presence. Sometimes they are crumpled and stained, or, on the contrary, neatly made up with a care that betrays the importance they have to those men and women for whom this is a last refuge for their privacy. A few objects emphasize that idea of a protective space for particularly fragile people. This is a place where people read, pray, or exist in a body that is being cared for of course, but also through thoughts and memories, as well as hopes clung to with the power of despair. The poetry that emanates from these images is in the realm of the ineffable. It is a poetry both of absence and of regret, of the missed connections between these suffering beings and our own fragility; the flaw or fault line, which, often unexpectedly, reveals the share of humanity in us that makes us fully-fledged human beings. By inviting us to look at these beds, one after the other, in a repeated pattern, Paolo Topy enables us to live the other’s experience through their absence. Circulating amongst these beds, we become attentive to the slightest detail that might express a presence. Imperceptibly, we become attentive to the other. This attention makes each of us the eyewitness to the distress that we too often feign to ignore, awakening our too often sleeping consciences.

Another piece emerges and distinguishes itself from this group in which non-representation of the body dominates: *Mohamed,* a seemingly banal portrait, imbued with tremendous tenderness, of a homeless man – and through him, of our besmirched humanity. The subject is pointing to a small tattoo on his forearm. The gesture joins a long tradition by referring to Doubting Thomas’s incredulity. It invites us into an intimacy that is being shared spontaneously, in the moment, but also not to be fooled by it. This image shows a current reality. Here the body powerfully expresses something that was experienced by both the subject and the artist who met and accompanied him: an experience that the latter wanted to share with us. It is a disenchanted representation of the body that exposes the subject’s suffering, and his humanity. This portrait reveals a fragile body, one that has been mistreated by life, a body that suddenly seems obvious because it exposes the other, it “is” the other. The other afterwards – after we have accepted them into our concept of humanity, of our *own* humanity. With this image, Paolo Topy enlarges the meaning of representation into a more global phenomenon: precariousness and exclusion. He insists that we notice this issue – a dramatic social reality – that we can’t ignore or doubt the existence of, and which should spark, not our compassion but our political conscience as citizens, i.e. the determination to work together to come up with a unified response to the issues and challenges we are faced with as a society.

*Pain* is a group of pieces using empty medicine packages that Paolo Topy recuperated in infirmaries and photographed without changing their shapes. These surprising images show tubes that are folded, crushed and twisted like bodies expressing the suffering and turning-inwards that come with disease; the solitude and distress of coping with pain. This series, in which each subject is shot individually over a neutral backdrop reminiscent of a hospital, powerfully and insightfully expresses human beings’ fragility and tendency to turn inwards when coping with the loss of social ties that comes with disease.

Each of the works by Paolo Topy presented in this show contributes to unveiling something of the body and to dissipating a portion of its mystery. The artist’s representation is imbued with a powerful duality. There is the evocation of the body as an object through the physical process of the medium of photography, an evocation that inevitably acts – insofar as it is a description of the visible world – as a trap that Paolo Topy invites us to elude.Face to face with this duality – which generates a situation in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to represent the body, or for us to have a complete, clear and well-defined vision of it – he goes so far as to experiment with the idea of causing it to vanish from his work altogether, the better to enlighten us and to help us access other worlds within the realm of the senses. That body that eludes our grasp reveals the relationship we maintain with “the same,” i.e. ourselves, as well as with the other, because from that quest for ourselves, the question of the other – a key issue for Paolo Topy – one which he proposes, not to resolve, but at least to reformulate with those words and that language that belong to him alone.

In connection with the complexity of a world that goes beyond the boundaries of his own body and his immediate surroundings, his art reverberates powerfully within us because it is connected to that world, which we belong to and of which it is a product.

This show is an invitation to become more aware of the need to go beyond boundaries, overcome obstacles and discover the other by becoming active, by taking advantage of all the possibilities that are offered to us by our own bodies. For it is through our bodies that we can have that experience – by agreeing to see, listen, communicate, and above all, feel, differently. By apprehending and thinking the body in a different way, we will be able to think the other in a different way and to bring meaning to the rapport we maintain with the world. A world that is still subjected to mankind’s folly. “From man to real man, the path runs through the madman,” Michel Foucault said in *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. It is our follies, the causes of the world’s dysfunctions, that Paolo Topy invites to consider so as to give us the means, not to invent a new world, but rather to redefine our relationship to a world that he exhorts us to re-enchant.

**Yves Peltier**

Translated from the French by Regan Kramer