

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Smith, Roberta. "Real, or Too Real? A Dazzling Show Goes the Way of All Flesh" *The New York Times* (March 22, 2018).

Welcome to the dollhouse, sideshow, morgue, cabinet of wonders and art-thriller that is "Like Life" at the Met Breuer.

The Met Breuer is going to keep doing sprawling, themed spectacles that pander, thrill and provoke until it gets them right. Its second attempt at this broadly appealing exhibition type, "[Like Life: Sculpture, Color and the Body \(1300-Now\)](#)," is miles better than its predecessor, "Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible," which inaugurated the Metropolitan Museum of Art takeover of the Whitney Museum's Marcel Breuer landmark two years ago. Despite its many glittering loans, that show seemed to say, "What are we all doing here?" Its second floor, a flameout of recent art, was in particular a curatorial cry for help.

"Like Life," though, is mostly stunning, magnetically so. How could it not be? It's all about the human body and face — the most transparently accessible, frequently depicted subjects in the history of western art — and the human desire to wrest both into lifelike three dimensions, from the classical Greeks to Degas to Robert Gober.



Body doubles at the Met Breuer include, left, "To the Son of Man Who Ate the Scroll" (2016) by Goshka Macuga, a speaking and moving android, who waxes on life and death. Right, "Auto-Icon of Jeremy Bentham" (1832), made with his own human bones, by Thomas Southwood Smith and Jacques Talrich. Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The show presents around 120 mostly realistic figurative sculptures, religious personages, manikins, artist's dummies, anatomical models, dolls and automatons, including a brand-new one from the Polish-born artist [Goshka Macuga](#) that natters on about the state of the world for 38 minutes with quotations from Shakespeare and "[Blade Runner](#)."

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As before, the exhibition takes up two floors and is even more intently ahistorical than its predecessor, mixing old and new from beginning to end. It is certainly more coherent. And it's unavoidably timely; issues of race, gender and identity are built in, as are the imminent threat, or promise, of robots and replicants.



"Sleeping Beauty" (1765) by Philippe Curtius, a medical sculptor, remade in 1989 by Madame Tussauds London. Wax sculptures coincided with the rise of Gothic romance. This one inhales and exhales convincingly. Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

In addition, this time the Met's design staff has triumphed over the Breuer's recalcitrant galleries. Filmy white curtains often substitute for walls, filtering light and mixing the silhouettes of sculptures and viewers in fleeting tableaux. The show is spaciouly arranged with thought and elegance, and full of engrossing groupings and pairings. Jeff Koons's immense, overexposed porcelain "[Michael Jackson and Bubbles](#)" benefits from its juxtaposition with an 18th-century Meissen set-piece "The Judgement of Paris." The most touching duo may be Augustus Saint-Gaudens's memorial marble portrait bust of [Louise Adele Gould](#) beside the painted wax version her grieving husband also commissioned: softer material and color collude to hauntingly lifelike effect.



"Like Life" juxtaposes sculptures throughout time, such as Duane Hanson's hyper-realistic "Housepainter II" (1984), left, and "Hermes," attributed to Polykleitos (A.D. first or second century). Mr. Hanson's sculpture of a black man whitewashing a brown wall underscores the curators' point that ancient marbles were originally brightly colored — and that the whiteness of Classical art is a fiction that has "colored" the Western view of perfection. Credit All rights reserved Duane Hanson/Licensed by VAGA, New York; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

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“Like Life” is awash with flabbergasting loans and encounters. Topping the list is the grandfatherly effigy of the influential British philosopher and reformer Jeremy Bentham — incorporating his skeleton. It is arguably the best-known object here, made, in accordance with his will, so that Bentham, who died in 1832, could sit forever in the halls of the University College London, where he taught; this is the first time it has left them. There’s an exquisitely beautiful “Sleeping Beauty” from Madame Tussauds in London, an 1989 update of an 18th-century original that inhales and exhales convincingly, save for a little mechanical hiss.

One of the most ravishing figures may have been intended for purely medical uses: Alphonse Lami’s 1857 flayed, or *écorché*, figure. A life-size man leaning into his shovel so spare and graceful he might be dancing; its blood-red musculature and tendons glow like stained and burnished wood but are actually painted plaster.



“The Digger” (“L’Écorché”) by Alphonse Lami (1857-58) in “Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body.” Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

In other words: welcome to the dollhouse, the morgue, the cabinet of curiosities, the surgical amphitheater, the last days of Christ (and the French monarchy); the circus, the sideshow, the travails of Christian martyrs and the Greek Golden Age as resurrected by the Romans, the Renaissance and Neo-Classicism. Although it sometimes turns a bit monotonous, and, by the end, morbid, the show gives evidence of Western art’s not entirely healthy obsession with realism, as well as the resurgence of sculpture in recent decades.

Many pieces will radically expand your sense of an artist’s sensibility or achievement. Antonio Canova’s half-size treatment of the legendary Greek pugilist [Creugas](#) shows this ultrarefined artist crosshatching and tinting plaster until it looks like gently roughened wood, and it’s dazzling. I was stopped in my tracks by [Nancy Grossman](#)’s monumental “Male Figure” of 1971, a three-quarter musclebound body in bondage — black leather corset, multiple zippers and belts. Its curves are reminiscent of Michelangelo’s “[Slave](#),” or Mae West. (Unfortunately for selfie takers, the piece is not allowed to be photographed.)

The progression of techniques, especially painted wax and polychrome wood, through the ages, is fascinating, though a serious gap is the great Late Gothic German linden wood sculptor [Tilman Riemenschneider](#), missing despite the Met’s magisterial 2000 retrospective. An exciting — and vulnerable — inclusion is the Iranian-born artist [Reza Aramesh](#), who uses the polychrome technique (linden wood included) to depict a Palestinian youth stripped down to his underwear at an Israeli checkpoint. He has much in common with his neighbor, Alonso Berruguete’s 16th-century polychrome-wood martyr, “Saint Sebastian” — except his snail-shell curls are those of a Greek god.

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Left to right, detail from Reza Aramesh's "Action 105: An Israeli soldier points his gun at the Palestinian youth asked to strip down as he stands at a military checkpoint along the separation barrier at the entrance of Bethlehem, March 2006" ; "Mask of Hanako, Type E" by Auguste Rodin (1911); "Self," a frozen-blood self-portrait by Marc Quinn. Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Pointed reminders on each floor indicate that the "color" of the show's title refers not only to chroma but to skin color. On four, Duane Hanson's hyper-realistic "Housepainter II" starts things off — a sculpture of a black man who is whitewashing a light brown wall. He underscores the curators' point, in the first section — called "The Presumption of White" — that Greek and Roman marbles were originally brightly colored and that the whiteness of Classical art is a pernicious, exclusionary fiction that has "colored" the Western view of perfection.

One floor below, Degas's defiant "Little Dancer," all beiges and bronze browns, but undoubtedly a white child, is mirrored in pose by Yinka Shonibare's life-size mannequin "Girl Ballerina," in colorful tutu, bodice and tights. She has brown skin, but no head. Her defiance is given force by the buccaneer's pistol she holds behind her back.

Each of the show's eight thematic sections stresses a different progression of style, materials, emotional keys, social circumstances and degrees of reality. "Likeness" encompasses such sublimities as Donatello's painted terra-cotta bust of an Italian aristocrat, which shines with aloof sensitivity, and Rodin's breathtaking translucent "Mask of Hanako II Type E," which seems the soul incarnate.

But also here is Hanson's hefty, exultantly banal "Housewife," slouching in her housecoat among cigarette stubs and magazines. In "Figuring Flesh" — the most morbid, chaotic section — the body is physically violated in various ways, by war, religion, abstraction or explorations of gender. As might be expected after this mayhem, the show concludes with an overly dark, slightly cheesy morgue-like extravaganza of death (not to denigrate the individual works) called "Between Life and Art." It features Maurizio Cattelan's "Now," a suited wax likeness of John F. Kennedy in an open coffin across from a reclining, pantless self-portrait by Paul McCarthy.

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Detail from “Now” (2004), a wax effigy of John F. Kennedy in a coffin at the Met Breuer revisits earlier centuries’ depictions of the saints. CreditVincent Tullo for The New York Times

Spend time with this show and you may think of Britain: the sensationalist taste of the collector Charles Saatchi (and “[Sensation](#),” the exhibition of his holdings); the British love of the hyper-real, of flesh and the body (think of the painters Sidney Spencer, Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud); the country’s formidable literary tradition with its emphasis on subject matter, narrative and the human condition. This can snap into focus with the juxtaposition of Mr. Bentham in his vitrine, with “Self,” the frozen-blood cast of the head of the artist Marc Quinn in its vitrine-like freezer. Mr. Quinn belongs to the “Sensation” cohort led by Damien Hirst, whose famous shark in formaldehyde might be a descendant of Mr. Bentham in his box.

Together, they suggest that the “Britishness” of the show’s two chief curators — Sheena Wagstaff, head of the Met’s modern and contemporary art department, and Luke Syson, head of European sculpture and decorative arts — may be germane to its formation.



“Housewife” (1969-1970) by Duane Hanson. CreditAll rights reserved Duane Hanson/Licensed by VAGA, New York; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

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Up to a point, I was willing to accept the “lifelike” requirement as essential to the show’s coherence. But on the third floor, all bets seemed off with the inclusion of a brightly enameled folk-artish sculpture of a couple by the Nigerian artist Sokari Douglas Camp. Was the show breaking ranks with realism? A trio of definitely nonrealistic works by Louise Bourgeois, Sarah Lucas and Dorothea Tanning followed.

By then they tended to make you wish for more deviations from realism, which begins to feel like an easy, crowd-pleasing way out. More awkward Medieval, less Renaissance and Baroque. Why not include some of the early 20th-century carved and painted wood figures of the German Expressionist sculptors Otto Müller, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Hermann Scherer? They all have a gravity of feeling embedded in form itself that can be missing from more realistic work.

In the end “Like Life” is an outstanding theme show that could have been excellent with a less tighter adherence to theme, a little less “Sensation.”



Left, “Buster Keaton,” left, by Jeff Koons, in polychromed wood, bridges the gap between low and high art. It is shown with “Palmezel,” right, a 15th-century painted limewood sculpture. Credit Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

But the Met clearly means to incubate a new at-home version of the international biennial, something with the combination of buzz, entertainment and historical seriousness that appeals to all levels of art appreciation, pro and layman. It’s not a bad solution to the problems museums face in terms of attendance and audience diversity. The Met is one of the few places in the world with both the collection and clout to pull it off.

Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body (1300-Now)

Through July 22 at the Met Breuer, Manhattan; 212-731-1675, metmuseum.org.

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