

Ruth Switalski & Tony Brotheridge

MATERIAL OBJECTS



Obsession is a powerful force, and an obsessive interest in the classical past wrote the Western European artistic canon, up to and well beyond the era of the Grand Tour. This was a passion fed by truncated fragments, for Greek and Roman sculptures were dug up as ruins: imperfect, damaged pieces that could then be reimagined and reassembled, if decontextualised from their original ritualistic settings. Whether in a museum collection or patrician home, the acquisition of these antiquities was informed by conspicuous consumption: the urge to display perfect specimens of spectacular material value. And while the drive was also at least intended to be educational, to trace human creation through time, it's no coincidence that many of the most prized works constitute nude bodies. After all, the human body, whether male, female, or at times, fluidly in between, has always been the vessel of a turbulent fascination – and in these terms, the obsession was transferred from the real to its simulacrum.

The history of western art is also characterised by an obsession to reproduce original antiquities for further consumption. The printing press was an ideal mechanism for this form of transmission, as were smaller scale models. Then, of course, we have plaster casts, which were produced in ever increasing numbers for upper class domestic and garden decoration, but also for artist workshops and academies, where the perceived need to imitate and emulate in turn took its cue from the artistic and textual traditions of antiquity. We get a snapshot of these contexts in numerous engravings and paintings: students or apprentices draw from casts of antique works and from original fragments alike, and casts of anatomised corpses take their place alongside their 'living' counterparts. A photograph taken in one of the studios at the Glasgow School of Art around the turn of the 20th century also shows this juxtaposition: in a studio, a cast of a flayed body stands alongside a selection of other plaster casts, including specimens from the antique. But this simply fits into the pedagogical taxonomy. From the time of the Glasgow Government School of Design's founding in the 19th century, and indeed well into the 20th, plaster casts were acquired, studied, used and displayed in ever increasing numbers: decorative architectural elements, animals, plaster fruit and vegetables, and classical masterworks alongside anatomical fragments such as eyes, feet and hands.

In fact, the relationship between art and anatomy is particularly pertinent: both involve 'perfect specimens' of examples conserved or made, and then put on display for close examination and reproduction. Leaving the artist's studio for a moment, we can look at an anatomical paradigm provided by William Hunter, who dissected the pregnant uterus for his seminal work *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus Exhibited in Figures* (1774). Alongside the preserved bodily elements within the Hunterian Museum of Anatomy, we find the various stages of the *Gravid Uterus* cast into plaster and lead, the peeled back skin and flesh uncannily resembling artistically draped cloth. In a similar vein to the Clemente Susini's wax anatomical *Venuses* (for instance, at La Specola in Florence), we could argue that modelling the form in three dimensions gave the further illusion of life, but also confers a type of voyeuristic deathly beauty, a perfect fusion of the abject and scopophilia.

Plaster casts are bodies, then, but their very naturalism does not belie their stillness, nor that they are simply facsimiles of their point of origin. And even though they were central to artistic practice, this paradox was never neutralised. After all, the cult of the original is pervasive and persuasive: if we consume a copy, are we having an authentic experience of the work, or only a sorry approximation? Famously, Walter Benjamin argued that reproducing a work of art works to the detriment of its 'aura'; however, others such as Latour, Lowe and Jeffrey have suggested that replication is simply the starting point for a more democratic delta of experience, and one that allows the 'aura' of the original to flow through time, space and place of consumption.

However, this conceptual approach does not fully resolve the difficulties in relation to plaster casts, not least in terms of their production. The Glasgow School of Art, for example, was supplied by *formatori* such as the local firm Giusti & Co. and also Brucciani & Co., a London-based company that made plaster casts of objects held in a variety of collections, including the British Museum and The South Kensington Museum, later the V&A. In fact, the Brucciani catalogues make it clear just what volume and variety could be procured, and for what cost. But by the end of the 19th century, the inherent dangers of making a plaster cast, whether from the original, or a copy of the original, were starting to be recognised. After all, casting any object involves applying the mould making substance to the 'original' surface, even if protected by a thin barrier substance; and also, what is lost in the act of translation? The 1848 catalogue of GSA's casts notes that some items were made from moulds 'far from the original', implying a hierarchy of quality that goes beyond authenticity, or the lack of it.

For the Glasgow School of Art, any debate on the plaster casts could only be intensified by the events of 2014, when fire swept the Mackintosh Building. Some casts were lost, others deeply scarified by the fire but then 'rescued' by an extraordinary conservation process led by Graciela Ainsworth. In the case of the ones you see here, which were moved to the Reid Building, the effects were light but significant: soot and heat damage, and you can see the traces of the protective bubble wrap at the throat of Antinous. It was not only the case that the casts could not be taken back to their former cream-coloured patina; the decision was that they should not be taken back. After all, these entropic traces add to what DeSilvey terms as an ecology of meaning, and they only serve to magnify the casts' impact.

Brotheridge and Switalski take on this deep fascination with plaster casts to consider all of these implications, and more. By borrowing these four examples from the Reid Building, and reinstalling them here, they dial up the existing juxtaposition of old and new to a further contemporisation: the reminders of classical antiquity take their place in a stripped back, almost industrial space, an aesthetic also seen in relatively recent display modes (see, for example, the Centrale Montemartini in Rome, and Paul Rudolph's Brutalist building for Yale School of Fine Arts, which managed to incorporate some of the plaster casts previously scrapped by Josef Albers).

Obsessed by the seduction of materiality, Switalski desires to understand, manipulate and revere certain materials and their associated processes: here plaster, in all its velvety mouldability. She plays with the idea of void and absence implicated within the notion of casting, although she has inverted the usual method – casting within the darkness of the mould – to use transparent folds of plastic sheeting. As such, the plaster drips in and through, coalescing within the light, and taking on an agency of its own. Furthermore, Switalski's forms echo the anatomical layering of the *Gravid Uterus* casts, as well as the hide/reveal of drapery in plaster casts of the antique. The swathes of silicone echo these sculptural textiles, furthering the sensual pull. We can reach out and touch, but we may find that the feeling is almost animalistic, and certainly fetishistic. While abstract, in fact, Switalski's works embody the possibility of a sensual reaction.

Here we can play on another antique trope: that painted or sculpted works depicting beautiful bodies could produce erotic responses in their viewers. Take our Venus, for example: she is a plaster cast copy of another plaster cast, or sequence of casts, modelled on the Venus de' Medici, itself a Hellenistic copy of a bronze original. Like all antique Venus types, she may have been inspired by a work, now lost, that stood in the shrine to the goddess at Cnidos. According to the ancient writer Lucian of Samosata, the sculpture was so sensually naturalistic that it drove its male cult worshippers to defile themselves, and indeed her, with their excretions.

But if Venus's power lies in her nudity, in a puffa jacket she is no longer a passive vessel for the gaze, and here Brotheridge indicates how self-representation is an act of agency. After all, stylistic choices are significant of social and cultural groups, but they can be intensely, obsessively personal, and indicative of desire, too; for we connect bodily signifiers like adornment, modification, or indeed clothing, to how we regard ourselves, and how we connect to others. The Discobolus's sportswear further subverts fashion hierarchies, for street style does not reflect the creation of garments, but rather a juxtaposition of ready-mades, an act that allows us to visualise our own sense of self. On the other hand, the Borghese Warrior wears a subverted white shirt, while the Capitoline Antinous is suited, but with a twist – here, too, there is a play on drapery and form, on hide and reveal, with Antinous allowing a glimpse of his scarified flesh, along with his buttocks. Once more, this is entirely in keeping with a classical signifier: that of the beautiful boy, and one, in the case of Antinous, who was loved and lost by the Emperor Hadrian, that archetypal architect of his own desires. But as the adored, but ultimately passive, object, a garmented Antinous has reclaimed his agency, a non-human actor in his own right.

Switalski and Brotheridge are bound together by a desire to push the boundaries of what is old, and what is new. They are also connected by similarities in practice and process, particularly in terms of the relationship between two dimensional surface and three-dimensional volumes. For Switalski, the focus on drapery and material embodies a dialogue between the surface-based medium and the plasticity of the fold; and for Brotheridge, drape, form and cut become a way of rendering the textured flatness of fabric into a new animation, a sculptural manipulation that is not usually considered in garment production. In fact, he has aimed to re-enact in fabric what the marble or plaster does in terms of drapery, its twists and turns, and to represent its illusion of mobility, petrified.

If, in the plaster casts, human flesh and muscle are rendered into anatomical form, here they are moved beyond facsimile to an embodied fascination. And in this collaborative approach to the past, we see a shape-shifting contemporaneity fuelled by enduring obsession and desire.

By Dr. Thea Stevens
Lecturer and Academic Coordinator,
School of Design, The Glasgow School of Art

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Material Objects is a collaborative exhibition of works by Ruth Switalski and Tony Brotheridge, using the Plaster Cast Collection of The Glasgow School of Art, and in response to the Plaster Casts of the Hunterian Anatomy Museum.

Working between Fashion and Sculpture, Brotheridge and Switalski present this new body of works exploring antiquity, fabric and desire, for Glasgow International Festival 2018.

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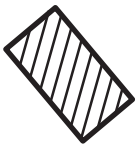
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1. *Suited Antinous*, Engineered Print, Cotton Sateen, Tony Brotheridge
Antinous, GSA Plaster Cast Archives
2. *Monoliths*, Plaster, Linseed Oil, Organza, Ruth Switalski & Tony Brotheridge
3. *Anterior Monoliths*, Plaster, Linseed Oil, Organza, Ruth Switalski & Tony Brotheridge
4. *White Collar Warrior*, Cotton, Tony Brotheridge
Borghese Warrior, GSA Plaster Cast Archives
5. *Standing Discobolos, Innit*, Cotton, Polyester, Jersey, Tony Brotheridge
Discopolous, GSA Plaster Cast Archives
6. *Crouching Venus*, Plaster, Linseed Oil, Ruth Switalski
7. *Venus in Puffa*, Polyester & Nylon Wadding, Tony Brotheridge
Venus de Medici, GSA Plaster Cast Archive
8. *Gravid Uterus*, Plaster, Latex, Ruth Switalski
9. *NYMPH(O)*, Plaster, Latex, Ruth Switalski