

Andy Best and Merja Puustinen

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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The modern epoch has transformed the discipline of sculpture so dramatically that its traditional focus seems to have virtually been forgotten. Following its reign as the epitome of visual expression, the human figure has gradually been liberated from all that stone, pulled off the plinth, redefined, de-emphasised, and pushed aside. In their exhibition of recent work — *Interactive videos and other fluff* (Gallery Sculptor, December 8-31, 2004) —, Andy Best and Merja Puustinen suggest the opposite is true. Presenting a series of portraits based on themselves and their children, they show that the body remains a fecund subject for visual expression.

The work $1 + 1 = 5$ (2004) welcomes the viewer into the gallery. Consisting of five monumental figures, it fills the gallery with colour and noise. The scale and position of the participants denotes a family portrait and the rudimentary character of their features suggests a child's design. Carrot-shaped breasts, penises, arms and legs project from bulbous torsos pressurized by built-in fans. Though the saccharin coloured — individuals (yellow dad, orange mom) and the mid-air placement of the toddlers are indicative of an active and joyful life, the work's title and other qualities convey a contrasting view.

Despite being filled with air, the parent's bodies appear tired and bloated. Sitting on the floor, they clearly cannot easily move. The presence of guy wires, a necessary structural aspect of the work, while keeping each member physically locked into place, reinforces this impression. Ultimately, a vision of lives fraught with restrictions and inherent instability overshadows the initial buoyant appearance. Family life cannot be translated into a simple, rational equation, for things add up to be more than what has been anticipated. This humorous and irony-filled tableau effectively deflates the romantic

notion of cocooning with the kids.

Bodydouble (2004) offers an altogether different glimpse of this artist pair. Best and Puustinen have created a three-dimensional, video-enhanced structure based on the image of da Vinci's ideal man. A four-tier stack of monitors replaces the man's body and the circle has been converted into a freestanding metal frame. At a distance one monitor displays superimposed views of the artists' chests. Only by coming close to the electronic column can their stratified forms be fully seen. Though the postures hint at classical sculpture, the artists make no attempt to keep still. Hands caress, figures pivot slightly, and details fade in and out, at times making it difficult to decipher who is who. The viewer's proximity to the column creates a sense of imbalance. One clothed body mirrors two nudes. Unwittingly, the viewer has been drawn into the artists' intimate sphere.

Da Vinci's image reflects the mystical belief that man's proportions derive from the golden section. But calculations intended to verify man's perfection served no practical purpose. The convergence of biology and geometry as a metaphor may be used to express aspects of reality that defy rational explanation. The blending of dissimilar bodies reflects Best and Puustinen's relationship, two lives that are professionally and personally intertwined. Reinforced by the fact that the four arms and four legs of da Vinci's man suggest two bodies, the use of this visual structure as a context for the digital delineation of their shared space makes perfect sense.

Moving to the third work the viewer might expect to see another sculptural view of the artists' bodies. But what the viewer encounters when activating *Portrait of the Artists* (2004) is a kaleidoscopic mix of fleshy textures and tones. Deciphering the action requires concentration as a series of detail images flash quickly across the screen. The viewer glimpses an eye, an ear and so on, fragmented by the random appearance of smaller details that conform to the structure of a nine-section grid. These views of the artists' bodies change as the viewer moves about the room. Paralleling the movement of the camera, the images are not only magnified as



the viewer moves closer, but the camera enters the artists' bodies to reveal mouth, throat, and stomach. When the viewer backs up, the camera retreats.

Stating that this portrait refers to life in a media-saturated world during a time of global terrorism, the work suggests that images hit us from every angle, their ubiquity forms an attack from which we cannot flee. It also highlights present security concerns and issues of identification. To make their point, the artists implicate the viewer in the process. As witness to the flow of images, the viewer becomes a victim, the images' effect operating on the subliminal level. As actor, the viewer becomes an aggressor, the penetrating camera implying medical probing or torture. This intensified cycle of images discomforts and informs. To the average eye, such extreme details disallow individual identification and bring the generic quality of the humans to the fore. Viewers bring the ongoing dissemination and ingestion of images to a halt when they leave the gallery. In the world at large, individuals have no such control.

This trio of works references a host of issues about the body's depiction and purpose. Deployed as abstracted hollow volumes, digitized classical forms and a mock psychophysical experiment, traditional figurative themes are reworked and

updated in intriguing ways. Their work denudes conventional portraiture of its formal aspects and glossy surface, in effect denouncing ideal forms of representation. In their hands the body becomes a malleable substance. They turn it inside out, merge two into one, and employ air to convey stasis and weight. Suggesting both 17th-century anatomy lessons and the work of early video/performance artists, the work delves beyond the surface by confronting the viewer with things they might not want or do not expect to see. Not only do the artists translate their personal relationship and experience into three challenging works of art, in the process they also confirm life's complexity and highly imperfect nature. ←

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Andy BEST and Merja PUUSTINEN,
Bodydouble, 2004.
Photo: Courtesy of the artists.

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